OLD RELIABLE

HARRIS DICKSON

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2

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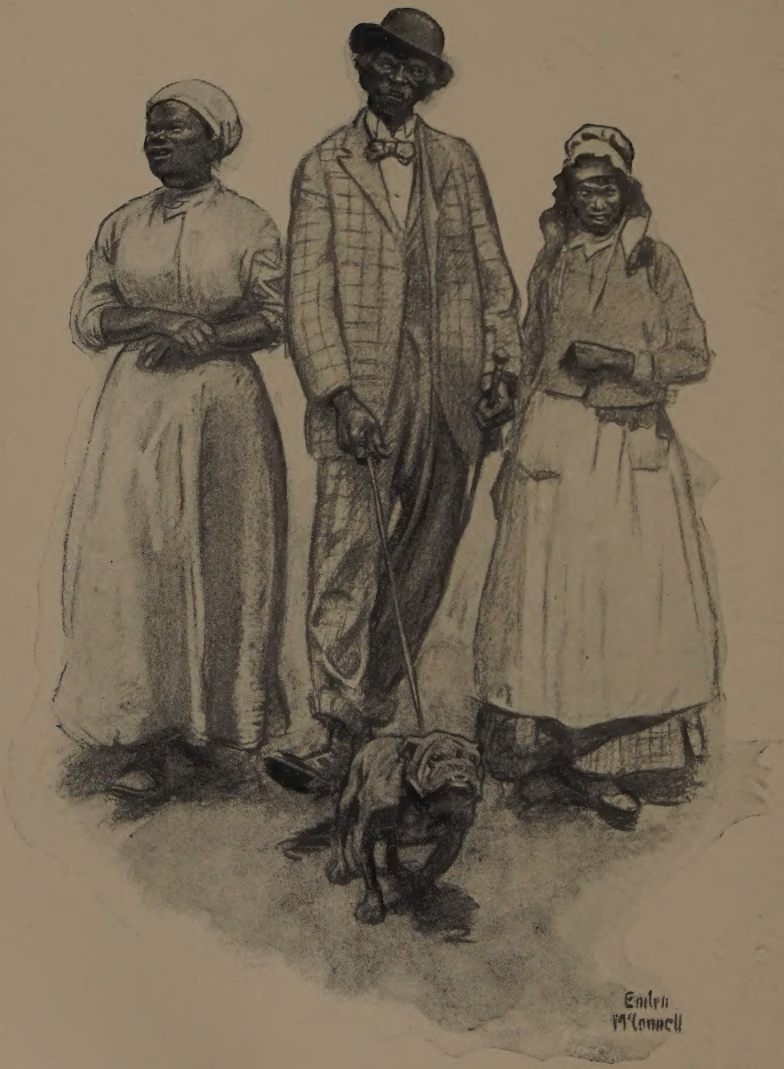

With Drif tugging on the leash

OLD RELIABLE

By

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SHE THAT HESITATES
THE DUKE OF DEVIL-MAY-CARE
ETC.

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CHAPTER I

A BUSY DAY

WITH one sweep of her muscular arm Aunt Selina snatched off the bedclothes. Zack scuffled out on the far side, like a little black beetle suddenly uncovered beneath a chip.

His big wife stood over him with a hand on each hip and ordered, "Go 'long, now, an' cut dat wood."

Zack's knees knocked together as he stepped into his breeches. Two funny little tufts of gray hair stuck up above his ears; he looked like a rabbit that had been shot at and was watching to dodge the second barrel. He lifted his head and answered: "'Tain't no wood."

"Didn't I tell you to ketch some driftwood outen dat ribber?"

"I got de rheumatiz."

"Rheumatiz!" The huge woman tightened the cord around her middle, like a warrior girding his

loins. "Rheumatiz don't hinder you from eatin' up de vittles fast as I totes 'em from de white folks' house. Put on yo' clothes an' git dat ax; I ain't gwine to leave dis house till I sees you started todes de ribber for dat driftwood."

Having the bed between them for protection, Zack dared to parley. "Lemme have a cup o' coffee."

Selina glared at him.

"'Tain't no coffee, cause 'tain't no wood to heat no coffee. You needn't be lookin' at dem palins. Mr. Musgrave say if we burnt de pickets off dis fence agin we got to pay fer 'em. More'n dat, don't you dare show yo' face at de white folks' house beggin' fer coffee."

Zack dressed himself in silence—that is, he did not contribute toward breaking it. His shifty little eyes watched his wife and saw no sign of weakening. He pulled his gray cap on tight, stuck both hands in his pockets and shuffled out of the front door.

Selina followed him to the edge of the gallery and called:

"Come back here, Zack, an' git dat ax."

Zack dragged the ax behind him and passed the gate. Selina stood with arms akimbo and watched him—a skimpy figure in a thin coat looking mighty limp and dejected. Being ludicrous as well, his competent wife laughed and relented. "Oh, Zack, lissen to me: de white folks is gwine to have company to-

day, an' dere'll be lots o' dinner to tote. I done invited Elder Moss and Sis Minervy to help us eat it. You jes' git dat wood an' dat's all I specs of you." Aunt Selina got out her biggest basket, put two empty buckets and several pans inside. "Tote while totin's good" is an excellent motto for a cook.

While Zack did not relish the hurry of his firing out, he peartened up his gait at the anticipation of turkey stuffin' and a bucket of soup from the white folks' kitchen. His extraordinary activities lasted until he turned the first corner. Then he stopped and began feeling the edge of his ax. "I can't cut no wood wid dis ax, an' me hongry as I is." He sat down on a little bridge to consider the disadvantages of being empty and having this wood-chopping job thrust upon him.

With such a grumbling void in his department of the interior he paid no mind to extraneous affairs. That's how a quick-stepping white man happened to get up so close behind him. "Good morning, old man." Zack bounced up—being nervous. It was young Doctor Gray, who carried a bridle over his arm and spoke in a hurry.

"Old man, have you seen a stray horse—big roan, blaze-faced, stocking foot? You know my horse."

"Yas, suh, I knows yo' hoss well as I knows my own chilluns."

"He broke out of the lot this morning and ran

down the street. I must have him at once—call to a very sick patient in the country."

"Dat sho' is curyus," mused Uncle Zack. "Jes' about daylight I heerd a hoss gallopin' past my house, an' sumpin come to my mind right den: 'Dat's Doctor Gray's hoss.' I spec he's grazin' in dat bottom alongside o' de railroad. Hosses mest in ginrally goes down dere."

"Can't you get him for me?"

"Sho' I kin. I knows 'zackly whar dat hoss is. You go home an' make yo'self easy; I'll tie dat hoss to yo' hitchin'-post in less dan ten minutes."

"What is your name?"

"Zack Foster, suh; but everybody, white an' black, calls me Ole Reliable."

"All right, Zack, I'm trusting you to get that horse in fifteen minutes."

"He's jes' as good as dere, ef I lives an' nuthin' happens. Thankee, suh, thankee, doctor; I never takes no gent'mun's money 'thout givin' him a satisfaction job."

Ole Reliable hung the doctor's bridle over his left arm and shoved the doctor's quarter into his right pocket. Then he got off in a bunch and made a grandstand start.

"Hold on, old man," called the doctor; "do you know where I live?"

"Yas, suh! Yas, suh!"

"What house is it?"

Zack guessed. "I knows de place—dat big brown house wid de white imiges out in front."

"No, no," corrected the doctor; "it's that house with the red roof, where the street-cars turn on Evergreen Street."

"O' course, suh, dat's de very place I meant. Ef you don't hurry I'm gwine to beat you home wid dat hoss."

Zack clipped a few seconds off the world's record for a hundred-yard dash until Doctor Gray crossed the street and disappeared. Then he slowed up and economized his wind. It would be a long way to walk back home, so Zack leaned restfully against Miss Trevelyan's fence. The ax had begun to get heavy. He peered around cautiously, then shoved it between the pickets and let it slip under Miss Trevelyan's hedge.

"Uncle! Oh, Uncle!" The woman's voice came so sharp and sudden that Zack straightened up guiltily. "Yas'm."

The Trevelyan sisters—prim little old maids—were coming directly toward him. They must have been behind that clump of cedars while he was hiding the ax. Their eyes were fixed upon him and he couldn't run. With laces at their throats they moved swiftly down the walk and paused to reassure themselves. Zack observed that they were in-

tensely excited, else they would never have lifted their voices and called to the street.

Miss Savannah Trevelyan stopped, erect and precise, in the midst of their old-fashioned garden of right-angle triangles and exact parallelograms. "Uncle, are you very busy?" Miss Savannah spoke hesitantly, and Miss Betsy nodded as if holding herself in part responsible for what her sister said. Zack doffed his cap; there was something eminently respectable in that bald streak running middlewise through the grayness of his head.

"Yassum, I always is got plenty bizness to 'tend to." Zack had such a kind face and such a pleasant twinkle to his eyes that Miss Savannah begged: "Can't you please come in and help us—just a moment. Dear little Edward has fallen into the cistern."

Zack threw open the gate and ran in with the bridle dragging from his arm.

The fluttered pair led him straight down that straight walk between straight rows of straight cedars. They wheeled around a corner and double-quicked to the cistern, which was sheltered by a riotous arbor of Maréchal Niels. Miss Betsy pointed excitedly: "He's in there! Oh, dear! get him out."

It was an old cistern and the top had rotted off. Zack could hear a splashing in the water. "Yo' little boy?" He glanced at each of them.

"No, my dog!" Miss Betsy drew herself up stiffly and they both turned very red.

"Jes' a dog, huh! I thought 'twuz a chile." He drew back and began to look leisurely around.

"Hurry! Please hurry!"

"Lordy, Miss, 'tain't no use takin' on so—dem little ole woolly dogs kin swim till Gabriel blows. Is you got a ladder?"

"Yes—there—leaning against the gardener's house."

While Zack went and came deliberately, the tiny ladies wrung their hands.

"Now, Miss, don't you be oneasy; he's jes' as good as out—I don't never promise nuthin' what I won't do; dat's me."

Zack prudently sounded the water's depth with a pole, then let down the ladder, testing each rung before he trusted his precious self upon it. The Misses Trevelyan gasped as he disappeared backward into the cistern, and gasped again when he emerged, holding the dripping Edward by the scruff of his neck. "Git away, Miss; git away—let 'im shake hisself a time or two." Which Edward promptly did when Zack flung him, sprawling, on the grass.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! we're *so* grateful; what *would* we have done without you? Uncle—Uncle—?"

"Zack Foster, Miss; but everybody, white an' black, calls me Ole Reliable."

"We wouldn't have troubled you, Uncle Zack," Miss Savannah apologized, "but our gardener is dead and—"

"Po' ole man, is he dead?"

"Did you know him?"

"Yas'm, I knowed him reel good." Zack was trying hard to think what kind of a negro this gardener might have been.

"We certainly do miss him. He had lived with us all of our lives; lived in that little house, and it was such a comfort to see his faithful light always burning in the window."

"Since he is gone we are very helpless," added Miss Betsy, and her limp appearance proved it.

Uncle Zack was not ready to go—certain little civilities in the way of coin had been overlooked. He gazed carelessly around him and remarked: "Dese flowers sho' do need somebody to take care of 'em."

Miss Savannah and Miss Betsy held their breath while the old negro's eye roved among their poppies, larkspurs and roses. Possibly he loved flowers. Possibly—they kept very still and looked at each other.

"I used to make a flower garden jes' like dis fer ole Miss."

"Are you a gardener?" they clasped their hands and asked in one voice.

"Yas'm; never follered nuthin' else in all my born days. Ole Miss wouldn't 'low nobody to tech her garden 'cept me."

"One certainly does get attached to flowers," volunteered Miss Betsy.

"Yas'm; dem roses wuz jes' like my chilluns."

Miss Savannah took one impulsive step and held out her hands. "Would you like to come here and live in that house and stay here always?" she surprised herself, but having once begun, Miss Savannah plunged on desperately. "Since Uncle Hiram died we haven't known what to do with our flowers. And we are afraid—at nights. We want some reliable man and his wife to live on the place just for the sake of company. Are you married?"

"Yas'm, I'm married."

"Is your wife a good cook?"

Zack's smile broadened across his face. "Good cook? Yas'm, she sho' is. But I don't 'low her to work, 'cause folks don't treat cooks like dey used to."

"You're a *good* man," spoke Miss Betsy fervently.

"Yas'm, Miss, times is changed. Quality folks is gittin' scarce. But now, ef 'twuz you what wanted a cook it would be diffunt."

"Yes, yes, we would be very kind to her," Miss

Betsy went on eagerly. "There isn't really much work to do, just for sister and myself."

"What does you pay yo' cook?"

"Three dollars a week for the cook; twenty dollars a month for the gardener, with everything furnished—house, fuel, board—everything."

As they talked, quite unconsciously they drifted toward the gardener's house. Zack eyed it critically. "Yas'm, dis sho' is one nice little house. Ain't many white folks got a house like dis, an' no niggers a-tall. I could have a flower-bed right here —dat is, ef you don't mind."

Miss Savannah brightened up instantly. "No, of course not; that's exactly what we want, some reliable couple who will feel that this is just as much their home as ours; take an interest in the place, and—"

"Well! Well! Well!" Zack looked around with an air of proprietorship. "De good Lawd sho' did lead my footsteps to dis place. Jes' all live here same as if it wuz one big fambly. I sho' is tired payin' rent an' workin' hard an' havin' dat rent-c'lector settin on my do'step ev'y Saddy night. Missy, when could you let us move?"

"The house is vacant," Miss Savannah beamed; "you can move in right away."

"Lemme see. Dis is Thursday, an' our week's up Saddy; 'twon't take us long to move, an' jes' make

it Saddy an' be sho'. I don't like to promise sumpin' an' den not do it. Lordy, Miss, dese weeds worries me." Zack dropped on his knees and began pulling weeds out of a row of sweet peas. The Misses Trevelyan put their arms around each other and watched him. It was too good to be true.

"Then you're going to move in Saturday? Really?"

"Yas'm, I'm comin' back here jes' soon as I ketches my mule. I was jes' in dat much of a hurry to ketch dat mule dis mornin' dat I got off widout no breakfast."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" exclaimed the Misses Trevelyan in chorus; "you have had no breakfast—nothing to eat this morning at all?"

Uncle Zack smiled like a stoic and shook his head. "Now, Missy, dat don't make no diffunce—no diffunce a-tall—" Protesting and declining, he followed them to the kitchen table; then, as a matter of politeness, he fell upon the biscuits.

Slice after slice of ham went the way of all flesh. Three times the molasses-pitcher gaped and flooded his plate. He stretched his legs comfortably, broke another biscuit and looked up. "Lordy, Miss, dis is jes' like hit used to be in dem good ole times. Me an' my young marster, we—yas'm, I *kin* drink tea, thankee, ma'am."

It would have been a mere formality to wash

Zack's plate when he sopped up the last streak of molasses and rose reluctantly. "Dat little snack sho' did taste good."

The two ladies followed him out into the gladness of the garden. Zack stopped beside the privet hedge and gazed sorrowfully upon its straggly shoots. "Now, jes' look at dat! Did anybody ever see a hedge what done growed up so rank! Lemme go git my clippers dis minit. My fingers is jes' itchin' to git hold o' dat hedge."

"Wait, I'll get our clippers out of the tool-house." Miss Betsy turned eagerly and started on a run. That ragged hedge had become an eyesore.

The suggestion staggered Uncle Zack. "No, Missy, don't git yo' clippers. I can't do reel good work wid no clippers 'cept mine. Once I took another feller's clippers an' sot in to trim a hedge—bless yo' heart, chile, it looked like de cows had gnawed it off. 'Twon't take me no more'n fifteen minits to run home fer my clippers. I'se comin' right back—you won't miss me outen dis yard."

Miss Savannah fumbled in her purse. "I wanted to give you half a dollar—Betsy, have you the change? But never mind, we'll give it to you when you come back." She closed the purse and Zack scratched his head.

"Missy," he admitted shamefacedly, "I jes' lacks dat fo' bits to pay de drayman fer movin' us, an'—

"Wait. I'll get it." Miss Savannah decided promptly and hurried to the house.

When Zack bade them *au revoir* their half-dollar clinked against the quarter that Doctor Gray had given him. The dear little ladies settled down on their gallery and sighed contentedly. "My! My! what a relief it is to have this trouble off of our minds—and be settled for life. It's dreadful to be changing servants—dreadful. Providence must have made poor little Edward fall into the cistern."

With Doctor Gray's bridle on his arm Zack ambled around the corner and did not stop until he noticed Mr. John Stampley pacing back and forth across a vacant lot, making measurements and driving stakes.

"Dar's dat man from up Nawf, jes' look at him! If I had all de money what he's got I'd hire a nigger to do dat kind o' work. I spec dat's how come dese Yankees is got all de money what dey is got."

Zack had much curiosity and no permanent prejudice against work if somebody else were doing it. He thought it would be kind o' pleasant to stroll in and see what the rich white folks were doing.

Mr. John Stampley was busy laying out the levels for grading a lot. When he glanced up it startled him to see a black, benevolent face peering over his shoulder. Zack smiled in the most amiable fashion. "Good mornin', boss—you used to be a soldier?"

with a nod at the Loyal Legion button. "I was in de army, too."

"What command?"

"I fergits de ginrul's name, but we fit all over."

Mr. Stampley had long since tired of refighting the war; his mind was intent on business. He caught sight of the bridle on Zack's arm and rose briskly. "Have you got a mule?"

"Yas suh."

"Ever do any grading?"

"Gradin'? Did you say gradin'? Lordy, boss, I ain't never follered nuthin' 'cept gradin' all de days o' my life."

"Where have you worked?"

"Helped build all dese levees an' big roads; I was jes' goin' to ketch my mule what I got fer work of dat kind."

Stampley made up his mind very quickly.

"See here, old man, I want a good, honest man to do this job—one of the kind that will pitch into it and keep digging until he gets done."

"Dat's me; I works kin an' can't—"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Begins work as soon as I kin see, an' quits when I can't see no longer."

Mr. Stampley laughed heartily. "That certainly makes a full day's work—what is your name?"

"Corporal Zack Foster," with another nod at the

red-white-and-blue button. "But everybody, white an' black, calls me Ole Reliable."

"So you were a soldier? Good! Learned a bit of discipline? Have you got a scraper?"

"Yas suh, got de bes' sort o' scraper."

"Now, suppose I give you the job; when could you start at it?"

Zack squinted his eyes narrowly as if considering his business engagements; then he consulted the sun. "Lemme see. It's nigh on to ten o'clock; I couldn't get started reel good until atter dinner."

"You mean one o'clock? To-day?"

"Sho'ly. Work don't never set around hollerin' fer Ole Reliable to come do it."

"Well, you are the most businesslike colored man I've met in the South. You get the job. And I guess we won't hoss-trade about terms. Two mules, a scraper and yourself, that's four dollars per day—"

Zack nodded: "Dat's jes' what I been gittin' all my life—I ain't never follered nothin' 'cept scraper work."

Mr. Stampley took out a note-book. "Guess I'll make a memorandum of our contract. A good understanding makes long friends."

"Dat's de God's troof! When does you pay off?"

"Saturday night."

"Dat's all I wants to know. I'm gwine right straight fer dat mule."

Mr. Stampley handed Zack a rough note of their contract, which he stuffed into his pocket beside the two coins. Then Zack turned abruptly and escaped. Mr. Stampley made some other memoranda; presently he glanced up in astonishment at the negro, who had already hurried off.

"Glad I got hold of him; he's a colored man in a million!"

When Corporal Zack Foster lost the impetus that he gained from the energetic Mr. Stampley he moved along wearily, then slackened his speed to a full stop and sat down to watch the gang who were laying the sewer. It was very restful to sit in the shade with his back against a tree, while those negroes were toiling in the sun. He dozed and meditated. "Wonder who dat white man wuz. Talk so brief he gimme a swimmin' in de head."

There Zack sat for an hour—maybe two—until "Here! you!" came a loud voice from behind. "You man sitting on that sewer-pipe. You're not doing anything; come here."

At first Zack turned his head indifferently, then sprang up. "Comin', suh," and started on a trot.

A vigorous man with slight gray mustache and complexion ruddily clear, sat on his broad front gallery, with one foot propped against a Corinthian column. He wore a suit of corduroys and a pair of hunting shoes—quite clean.

"Comin', suh," Zack repeated, dropping Doctor Gray's bridle just inside the gate. He hurried up the front walk, stopped at the bottom step, deposited his cap and stood waiting. "Yas suh."

Colonel Spottiswoode took a long pipe from his mouth and smiled—the smile of a man whom years have mellowed. "I've been sitting here for an hour, watching you. You're just lazy enough to suit me—go around to the stable and saddle my horse—everybody's gone but me."

Zack knew this kind of man, and this kind of man knew Zack. Neither of them asked a question. Within a few minutes he came back leading a horse.

"Hitch him to that post in front."

Zack moved swiftly and returned. The colonel smiled again and inquired uselessly:

"Do you reckon you can find the kitchen?"

Zack only grinned; then the colonel laughed aloud.

"Of course you can find the white folks' kitchen. Follow your nose—it's right back yonder. The cook got my lunch ready and then left it on the stove. I'm going on a camp hunt. Put everything on the table so I can have a bite before the boat leaves. Hold on. Start a fire and make us some coffee."

"Whar's de coffee, Cunnel?"

"How the devil do I know? Root around until you find it. What's your name?"

"Zack. But everybody, white an' black—"

"Who did you belong to?"

"Ole Judge Foster. I went to the war wid my young marster, Mr. Peyton Foster—everybody white an' black, calls me Ole Reliable."

Colonel Spottiswoode nodded to himself. "I thought something like that; knew it just as soon as I set eyes on you." Zack let out such a laugh as Aunt Selina hadn't permitted him for many a day. "Us ole-timers sho' do know each other, don't we, Cunnel?"

"Yes. Quit talking and hurry up. I've got to catch that boat."

Zack grinned himself toward the kitchen. Here was a job that was a job.

Colonel Spottiswoode smoked on placidly, well knowing that in the languid course of nature Zack would amble down the hall and say: "It's on the table." When that happened the colonel went into his dining-room. The cook had left his table ready-set and Zack had little or no chance to make a mistake. And if he had the colonel would not have noticed it.

"Now, Zack, break some ice—open the sideboard—that second bottle, that's it. Two glasses, little one and big one; now the sugar and the spoon. Good!"

Having been at home alone for several days, the colonel had a lot of bottled-up conversation in his

system which he uncorked on Zack. The stirring of that melted sugar into the crushed ice helped to make him communicative.

"My yard-boy left me—went away without saying a word."

"Yas suh, dat's jes' like dese young niggers; dey ain't a bit o' 'count."

"No, Zack, they are not like the old ones."

"Dat dey ain't, suh; dey doan know who dey frien's is—want to be ramblin' and movin' 'bout all de time. Can't put no 'pendence on 'em."

The colonel stirred his toddy meditatively. "And so you went to war with Mr. Peyton Foster?"

"Yas, suh—all de sojers said I was de blackest Johnny Reb in de whole entire war."

"And you had four years under Marse Robert," the colonel observed.

"Yas suh." Zack grinned and sniffed, for the aroma of that toddy was beginning to wander his way. "Me an' young Marster sho' did have tough times. We fit side by side. He jes' couldn't make me stay back in de camp. Dem Yankees kep' us movin' so peart todes de las' dat we didn't have much chance to go into camp. My folks is done all died out," Zack ended with a sigh. "I tell you, Cunnel, it goes powerful hard wid a ole man like me to be hustlin' fer hisself widout no white folks."

Colonel Spottiswoode tinkled his glass thought-

fully. "Yes, yes, I took you for that kind. Oh! I forgot. Get yourself a glass—back in the pantry. Take this with you."

Zack took the essential ingredients and retired to the pantry, while Colonel Spottiswoode finished his solitary dinner.

"Oh, Zack!" he called presently, "go up-stairs, look in the right-hand front room and get my suit-case, two guns and a roll of bedding. Everything is right together in one pile, you can't miss it. Bring it down in the hall." The colonel went out on the gallery and sat there smoking until Zack gathered the hunting outfit, ate his dinner and came out wiping his mouth on his coat sleeve. Without a word he handed the old negro a cigar.

"Thankee suh, I'll jes' slip dis in my pocket." The colonel laughed and held out another. "Smoke this one right now—I'm lonesome."

Then they talked about the war and the old-time people that they used to know. "Me and Mr. Peyton sho' did fight dem Yankees, up one side and down de yuther; we—" Mr. Stampley hove in sight; for a moment it looked as if he meant to open their gate. Zack knew he could not discuss the war diplomatically in the presence of Colonel Spottiswoode and Mr. John Stampley, so he sprang up suddenly and disappeared into the house. When everything was safe he emerged with a glass of water. An idea

had struck the colonel. "Zack, can't you get ready quick and go on that camp hunt with me?"

"Yas suh, Cunnel, I sho' kin. I'd be powerful proud. Jedge Foster never would go huntin' widout me. He said nobody couldn't brile a piece o' venison or roast a duck 'cep Zack."

"Good!" exclaimed the colonel. "Go and get ready." Zack looked down at his thin breeches and wornout shoes. "Cunnel, it gits mighty cold dese nights in de swamp. I gotter buy some clothes an'—"

"You haven't got to buy a thing. Come upstairs."

Zack followed him expectantly into a big room where much furniture and household plunder was piled in confusion. Colonel Spottiswoode opened a cedar chest and flung out garment after garment—overcoat, breeches, coat, vest, a pair of hunting shoes and a soft black hat.

"There's your outfit—bundle it up. But I reckon you'll have to get some bedclothes at home; a couple of quilts will do. We've got everything else. Here's a dollar to pay the drayage with and get yourself some tobacco. Your clothes can go on the boat with mine."

Zack scratched his head and suggested: "Cunnel, ef it's jes' de same to you, I'll run home wid dese clothes an' put 'em on."

"All right; but the boat leaves at one o'clock—don't miss it."

"Lordy Cunnel, I wouldn't miss dat boat ef she lef' right now—I'd jes' nacherly fly."

Zack trudged off with his dollar and the load of clothes, Doctor Gray's quarter and the bridle, fifty cents from the Misses Trevelyan, and the grading contract from Mr. Stampley. For a rolling stone he gathered pretty well. At the gate he turned, "Cunnel, it was one o'clock you said? Yas suh; I jes' wanter be sho' an' make no mistake."

Zack did go home; perhaps he intended to catch that boat. But this was his busy day. He dropped his bridle on the front gallery and dumped the clothes on a chair until he could get into them himself—a new man from shoes to hat. He stuck the unlighted cigar in his mouth, just to see how he looked, then carefuly replaced it in his pocket.

There were only two quilts on the bed; Zack jerked them off. Selina would make remarks when she got cold, but—sufficient unto this day. While Zack was prowling around for a rope to tie the quilts he heard the clatter of a wagon and ran to the door. Two negroes that he knew were standing up, driving; a fat black man sat down flat with his legs dangling out and was getting his teeth jarred loose.

"Hold up," said the fat one, "dere's Brudder Foster."

In response to their call Zack went out to the gate and stood beside the wagon, talking for a few minutes. He shook his head doubtfully until Jimson took a long brass key out of his pocket and handed it to him. Then Zack climbed over the tailboard of the wagon and went rattling down the street with important business ahead.

In the lower part of the city near the river the wagon stopped again and Zack got out. Jimson gathered up the reins. "Now, Brudder Foster, we'se dependin' on you to sweep out an' make a fire fer de meetin'. Dat's de onliest key dey is an' nobody can't git in 'cep you lets 'em in."

The men drove off and left Zack standin' there alone.

"Now, dat's jes' what I say 'bout dese niggers," he grumbled; "whenever dey wants sumpin' did right quick dey calls on Ole Reliable."

Across the street was the Hot Cat Eating House, where a crowd had gathered in the rear, men and women, laughing and talking. Zack saw various packages and bundles which suggested travel, and once in a while he saw a tall, slim, black, wobbly-looking negro giving them something to drink.

"Huh! dem niggers is havin' a mighty good time; dere's Alec Brown—I'm gwine to see what he's doin'."

Zack loafed across the street and went in. No

sooner did he stick his face in at the door than Alec Brown grabbed him.

"Here's Ole Reliable, he'll go wid us."

"Whar y'all gwine?"

"Cotton-pickin'." Alec dragged him through the crowd to the wobbly negro, who was a labor agent. "Here, Nathan, here's anudder good han'—he'll go."

Nathan Hooter turned, and his funny little beard stuck out like a two-tined fork. "All right, gimme his name." And he wrote it down.

"What is you payin'?" Zack asked cautiously.

"Six bits a hundred; good cabin, plenty wood, pay off every Saddy, and five dollars advanced jes' as soon as you git off de boat—" Nathan explained copiously, gave Zack a drink, and stuck a blue ticket in his hat, which marked him for the gang.

Zack smiled contentedly as he took his seat on a box. "Now, dat's jes' what I been wantin' to do—go to de country. Dis here town work'll break a man down."

At first dark Nathan Hooter lined up his gang and marched them, two by two, down a long hill toward the boat, each with a blue ticket in his cap.

Ole Reliable fell in beside Alec Brown and began asking questions: "Alec, how long you reckon dis job is gwine to last?"

Alec shifted his load to the other shoulder, and replied, "Hit's bound to last six weeks; d'ain't no

way to git home atter you once git up dar an' dat overseer he'll p'intedly make dese niggers work. But dey pays good money."

Six weeks' steady work—Zack looked it squarely in the face and began to walk lame. He had a dollar and six bits in his pocket already and didn't want all the money there was on earth. He must do something before Nathan Hooter got him aboard that boat. Nathan walked up and down the line, keeping close watch on his gang; but he was looking the other way as Zack passed a dark alley—two sidesteps and the trick was turned. Zack dodged into a yard and ducked behind a fence until the procession got by.

Nathan Hooter loaded the rest of his gang on board the boat, but Ole Reliable wasn't with them. He was half the way home, shivering at his narrow escape. When Zack drew near his own home he saw his wife going into the door. The preacher and a woman stopped on the gallery until Selina struck a light. Zack waited outside, very prudently, and heard his wife exclaim: "In de name o' Gawd! who's been here an' tore dat bed all to pieces? What's dat bridle doin' on de flo'? Dar's all o' Zack's clothes—what you reckon dat nigger is got on?"

Zack paused a moment, then stepped to the door, but had no chance to make his excuses. Selina got

the start of him: "Is dat you? Is *dat* you? Look at dat basket, full o' dinner, an' not a splinter o' wood to warm it by."

Zack straightened up and maintained himself before the company. "I ain't had no time; I been too busy tendin' to white folks' bizness to cut wood fer wimmen."

"Git out o' here; you'se too busy to eat dinner wid wimmen."

The door slammed in his face. Zack dodged backward, then started on a run to the Trevelyan hedge, where he recovered his ax.

Selina was still mouthing when he got back to the house. "Open dis do'," he called; "here's yo' wood." He laid his turn of wood beside the stove and sat down. It was fine dry wood, and burned merrily. His wife stopped with a piece in her hand.

"Whar did you git—" Selina shut up suddenly, for she recognized the pickets that came from the fence around the house out of which Sam Ellis had moved.

CHAPTER II

HE FINDS A JOB—FOR SOMEBODY ELSE

ZACK could now saunter about the streets, living on the interest of that dollar and six bits which he had gained by vigorous and versatile enterprise. But he sometimes wondered whether it were worth while to have money at the price. His spiritual system required peace; he hated sudden jars and undue excitement. The only mental or physical activity which he now permitted himself was to peer cautiously around every corner before he turned it—else he might blunder into Doctor Gray, the Trevelyans, Mr. Stampley or Colonel Spottiswoode. If any of these undesirable acquaintances walked abroad, Zack always sought refuge in the Hot Cat Eating House—a sanctuary of serenity where troubles never troubled and clamors never came. Here he could air his views in a sympathetic atmosphere.

"Ef luck's agin you 'tain't no use to squirm an' twist." Ole Reliable put the quintessence on that mouthy nigger from Saint Looey who had no legal right to raise an argument in the Hot Cat.

Black nakedness ran across the top of his head,

which left two frizzled tufts of hair standing stubbornly on either side—like grass-clumps on the edge of a burned field. He put on his dilapidated derby and rose to signify that the controversy had been settled.

Aunt Fanny flopped a piece of catfish in the skillet and paused with spoon in hand. Greasy odors curled upward, filled the stifling room and sneaked out upon the street to entrap every passing negro that had a nickel.

A town nigger would have known better than to open his mouth—except to put something in it—for Ole Reliable was a powerful hand at argufyin' on the Scriptures. The venturesome stranger lifted a bite of catfish and rested his elbows on the red oilcloth that covered the table. "Who is you, anyway, dat knows so many facts what ain't so?"

Ole Reliable stooped to condescend. "Me? I reckon you don't live in Vicksburg ef you ain't acquainted wid who *I* is. I'm Corp'ral Zack Foster; but everybody, black and white, calls me Ole Reliable. As I forestated, ef luck's agin you you might jes' as well lie down flat on yo' back an' say: 'Here I is, Luck—what you gwine to do wid me?' "

Then he wafted himself toward the door.

"Jes' look at 'im," jeered the stranger; "wearin' de white folks' second-han' clo'es. I let you-all know *I'se* a genterman."

Zack glanced down at him from the heights of a superb scorn. "Huh! Starvation'll gentle anything." With this sockdolager the corporal moved on in majesty and halted at the door.

Luck was agin him and immediately proceeded to play horse. He had no business in the catfish stand and he had no business out of it. It would have been immaterial whether he stayed in or came out. Yet he came out. In full view of his audience he ponderously reflected upon nihility, then passed leisurely toward the nearest unoccupied space. He faced to the right and marched up the street. There was no reason why he did not turn to the left and march down the street. Directions and destinations were not of consequence to Ole Reliable; he had no particular place to go, and he had plenty of time to get there in. His wife wouldn't tote vittles home from the white folks' house until late in the afternoon, and this was the only pressing engagement that he had.

He suppressed his energy in front of the pawnbroker's shop, not that second-hand pistols interested him, but simply because Luck meant to bring him face to face with the Misses Trevelyan. Ever since the day he had hired as gardener to these trusting ladies Zack had not laid eyes on them but once. Upon that nimble occasion they did not lay eyes on him because he saw them first.

It must have been the glitter of gewgaws in the pawnbroker's window, but Zack failed to observe Miss Betsy Trevelyan standing at the curb beside a basket of vegetables. She was alone, which was unusual, but entirely proper. Zack squinted backward. There was no mistaking that tiny figure with the voluminous black skirt and primly folded hands. Her face was turned toward the street; nobody had such a profile as Miss Betsy.

Zack sidled off like a crab, intending to dodge into the Italian's fruit store. He did not walk or run or glide or fly, he merely ceased to be in the place where he had been. His eyes remained nailed hard and fast to Miss Betsy.

Luck was agin him. If he had been looking where he went he would not have bumped into Miss Savannah Trevelyan as she stepped out of the fruit store—which ruffled that lady's sense of decorum.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, drawing up her five feet three. Zack wheeled, and off came the battered derby.

"Lordee, ef here ain't Miss Savannah! I was jes' a-goin' in to see ef dat warn't you."

Miss Savannah composed herself. "Uncle Zack, I'm *so* glad it's you." She bore him no resentment; she had forgotten, and so could Zack.

"Oh, dear! Uncle Zack, we are in *such* a predicament. Sister and I have bought a basket of

vegetables, and the man can not send it home. We are to have company for dinner and must carry it ourselves—"

Zack glanced at the heavy basket, then at the two little ladies. A job had found him.

Miss Savannah unconsciously caught him by the sleeve and was leading him toward her sister. "Betsy, here is Uncle Zack—I am sure he will help us."

"I can't hardly spare a minit, Miss Savannah, but bein's it's you—" Zack took up his job and walked.

When the Trevelyans left their street-car Zack labored up the hill behind them, for his burden had grown heavy. He hung back at the gate and lagged along the walk which led through their formal garden. There was the ragged hedge that he had promised to trim, and it suggested awkward situations when they should remember to question him about it. But the thought of company excited these little ladies and they forgot.

Edward, the fat poodle, waddled out to meet them and snarled, then snapped Zack's trousers in a tentative sort of way. Zack hated these smear-eyed dogs with blue ribbons around their necks, but he did not kick at him—merely set the basket down as a polite precaution. Miss Savannah patted Edward and administered fitting reproof: "There, there, Edward! Don't be cross with Uncle Zack.

Don't you remember he got you out of the cistern?" Edward sniffed, disdainful and unconvinced. Then he trotted down that long, straight avenue between the cedars.

Blind luck had hold of Zack, and he was thankful that it towed him around the corner and anchored him in a kitchen. But he didn't enjoy the way the cook nodded at him.

The ladies hurried through the front part of the house and met him in the kitchen. "Mammy, here's the marketing. Uncle Zack will stay to dinner."

"Dis is a pretty time o' day fer you to be fetchin' things home fer a cump'ny dinner. How you reckon I'm gwine to cook all dis?"

"But, Mammy, we are not very late. Sister and I will help."

"You chillun git out o' dis kitchen an' lemme 'lone. Set de table—dat's all I wants you to do. Dinner is gwine to be all right, but you gotter cook a heap when de preacher comes."

Mammy Liz unpacked the basket and handed Zack a couple of shiny pans. "Snap dese beans an' hull dem peas. Nobody can't eat in dis kitchen widout workin'."

Zack eyed the liberally built cook, who had come from the Trevelyan plantation to help out temporarily. Every movement was a reminder of the favor she conferred. She stirred and stirred at

something in a pot. When she opened the stove door it smelt so almighty good that Zack hulled peas and kept a-hopin'. He crossed his legs resignedly and rested his back: "Here I is, Luck."

After a while Miss Betsy ventured into the kitchen. She was the little sister and lacked the mature discretion of Miss Savannah. Without preliminaries or warning she turned upon Uncle Zack: "Why didn't you come back and trim the hedge? We got everything ready and waited for a week."

Mammy Liz wheeled from the stove: "Miss Betsy, is dat de same ole nigger what lef' here to git dem clippers an' neber showed up no mo'? Huh!" That was all she said, but she could have added nothing. Ole Reliable knew that Mammy could read his very soul. With a disconcerting view of her back he made a stagger to explain:

"Yas'm, yas'm, I had bad luck. My wife tuk one o' dem faintin' spells de minit I got home. She's a weakly 'ooman, and Oliver is been sick so continual it jes' nacherly wore her out."

"Who is Oliver?"

"Dat's my son-in-law—married my gal Calline."

"I'm so sorry," Miss Betsy sympathized. "You can trim the hedge another time. Come in the dining-room and help put a leaf in the table."

Mammy objected: "Honey, you go on out o' here an' let 'im hull dem peas—"

"Just a minute, Mammy—he'll come right back."

Zack was so anxious to escape from the kitchen and the cook that he proved very efficient in the dining-room. The sisters deliberated in executive session and Miss Savannah announced the official result: "Uncle Zack, we have thoroughly decided that you must wait on the table."

"Yas'm, yas'm—"

"Sister will give you one of the jackets our butler used to wear—and—and some other things—"

Miss Betsy nodded. "Now come with me, Uncle Zack."

He followed her to the garret, a spacious room lighted through those curious little tunnels that terminate in dormer windows. Each trunk and chest held its personal position in a definite line. Miss Betsy opened the third chest, thought a moment, then reached in and produced a white linen jacket accurately folded. She extracted collars and cuffs and a black choker necktie, without disturbing another garment.

There was no confusion in that garret until Miss Betsy herself became confused, and her fingers began to fumble and fumble without bringing anything to light. Presently she suggested without looking up: "Uncle Zack, suppose you go over there to the window."

After he had turned his back she lifted a mysteri-

ous article and wrapped it in a non-committal package. It was a shirt.

When Uncle Zack ambled toward that window the first thing to catch his eye was a gold-headed cane. Then he could see nothing but a glittering, sheeny, incomparable cane that fascinated him. He just naturally reached out as innocently as the baby that grabs for a gold watch. Edging closer, he touched it with the tip of a long forefinger, caressed its tapering length—and shivered. "Lordee! Dem niggers sho' will be 'sprised when I marches into de lodge-room wid dat walkin'-stick."

Luck was agin him. Miss Betsy burrowed deep in the chest, preparing the shirt for a masquerade début. She wasn't looking; nobody was looking. The window stood open, and Ole Reliable borrowed that gold-headed cane. With one movement swifter than the slap of a cat he dropped it through the window into a tangled rosebush.

"Now, Uncle Zack"—the old man jumped and started toward Miss Betsy—"here is everything you need. Go down to the gardener's house and put them on. Brush your clothes and polish your shoes —we want to feel proud of you."

"Yas'm, yas'm. Dis sho' is one nice coat."

Zack disappeared into the gardener's house, and when he issued forth from his toilet the wife of his bosom would not have recognized him—for Zack

was arrayed. Tall white collar, self-evident cuffs, dustless trousers and elaborately-polished shoes. The choker had exasperated him, and he wrought a diabolical revenge. It writhed in agony around his neck. He strode into the kitchen, half suspecting that his cruelty to the choker might cause comment. It did.

"In de name o' Gawd!" Mammy Liz exclaimed, "what is dat you got on? Come here, you po' ole fool."

She jerked him and shoved him, pulled and tugged, untangled the knots and smoothed out the folds; then patted it flat against his chest. "Now! dat's de way Hiram useter wear it. Go 'long an' tend to yo' bizness."

Zack passed into the pantry.

From the other side of the door Mammy Liz heard Miss Betsy say: "Doesn't Uncle Zack look nice?"

Presently Zack took particular notice of what Miss Savannah said: "Now, Betsy, get some whisky for the pie." Miss Betsy looked questioningly at her sister: "But—the clergyman?"

"Yes, we have quite decided on that—quite. It would be hypocrisy if we did not. We invited Mr. Harlowe to a home dinner. If we had no whisky in the pie he would think we never used it. I should feel that we were guilty of a small deceit."

Miss Betsy kept shaking her head, but she led the way. Zack and the poodle dog followed her into the old-fashioned library which had been occupied by Doctor Trevelyan for more than fifty years. "Huh!" he remarked, "dem books puts me in de mind o' Jedge Foster. He war my ole marster."

Miss Betsy, overborne in argument, but not convinced about the propriety of using liquor, opened the black-walnut case and Zack saw an array of decanters and glasses that fired the dryness of his heart. "Dat's jes' like ole Jedge Foster's sidebode."

Miss Betsy selected a decanter and wiped the dust away with her apron. She had misgivings, but was not stingy, and, pouring a generous allowance into a cup, took it to the pantry and set it down upon the table.

The cup of whisky and Miss Betsy's purse—two-thirds of human temptation—lay there seductively exposed, and Zack's main line of travel passed them. Being a man with a hanker, it wasn't fair to beset his path with pitfall and with gin. He might jes' as well lie flat on his back and say: "Luck, here I is. What you gwine to do wid me?"

Presently Mammy Liz began rattling a pan; Miss Savannah was arranging flowers in the hall, and Miss Betsy had gone up-stairs—cursed opportunity!

The fumes from that uncovered teacup rose into the air, and Zack only meant to smell it.

Luck moves in mysterious ways its wonders to perform. Mammy had just fed dear little Edward. Being full, he felt that he must justify his right to live. He must *do* something. Swelled up with pot-licker and purposes he ran into the pantry and grabbed Zack by the trousers' leg. Down smashed the cup, and down sprawled Zack with a dish-cloth, sopping up the whisky. Edward backed himself under the table and yapped at Zack's bald head, for which nobody could blame him.

The crash drew a crowd.

"Oh! Oh!"

"What is broken?"

"Dar now! Jes' look at dat!"

Zack mopped and scrubbed and explained: "I warn't studyin' dat little ole woolly dog. He runned in here an' grabbed me by de leg for nuthin'—cose I jumped an' jostled dis here cup from de shelf."

"Naughty! Naughty! Edward, don't be ugly."

Then everybody stopped and listened to something else—footsteps. Footsteps, footsteps—nearer, nearer—footsteps coming up the front walk.

"Here they come, Sister!" Miss Betsy's voice betrayed her agitation. "Shall I open the door—or you, as the older? Or do you think we should send Zack?"

It was a detail they had not thoroughly considered. Being undecided, they went *en masse,* the

two ladies in front and Zack stopping midway of the hall.

Luck was agin him. Zack did not look at the clergyman a second time. But the other guest was Colonel Spottiswoode, whom he had been dodging for a month. "Oh, Lordy," he groaned, then melted away into the pantry. There he debated. Of course, the colonel would say nothing in the presence of these ladies—not even intimate that he had ever seen him before. Zack meant that he should never see him after. So, when Ole Reliable made his grand entry and wheeled into position behind Miss Savannah's chair, he kept his eyes rigidly to the front.

This butler promptly caught the Englishman's eye. Mr. Harlowe looked again at the stiff-necked pattern of propriety who had stepped out of a glamourous romance to serve their dinner. It was what he had expected to find in the South, yet the fact pleased him. Zack was a success.

With a single-minded clerical appetite Mr. Harlowe kept his eyes on the plate, duly conscious of an impressive dignitary who passed the potatoes.

"Miss Trevelyan," he remarked during Zack's absence in the pantry, "these family servitors in the far South are so very interesting. I can imagine how that old man has stood behind that chair for several generations. They really give the impres-

sion of a fixed aristocracy uncommon in America —of institutional stability, so to speak, such as we have in England."

Colonel Spottiswoode chuckled to himself; Ole Reliable did cut quite a figure. He broke into a laugh. "Miss Savannah, is that the one that everybody, white and black, calls 'Ole Reliable?' "

Miss Savannah nodded and Miss Betsy gulped audibly.

"He works 'kin and can't?' "

"And pray, how is that?" broke in Mr. Harlowe.

The colonel chose his words carefully for a British explanation: "He means that he begins to work just as soon as it is light enough so he can see; and he quits work when it is so dark that he can not see. Works kin and can't."

"Fawncy! Fawncy! How very remarkable. I must remember that. Pardon me—" Mr. Harlowe made an entry in his note-book. "That gives you the advantage over us—our help—"

It tickled Colonel Spottiswoode to watch Miss Savannah's expression while the clergyman spoke of certain admitted defects in their English servant system.

Miss Betsy's color rose; she lifted her brave eyes and insisted, "But, Mr. Harlowe—"

She was interrupted in her confession, for Zack reëntered with splendid assurance, balancing a tray

on his finger-tips; Colonel Spottiswoode was not going to give him away and it made him very perky. He served them jauntily through the meal, dignified and debonnair, yet felt easier when Miss Savannah pushed back her chair in token that the function had come to a due and timely conclusion. They withdrew to the front gallery and lingered there for half a cigar. Zack went back and forth from the gallery to the dining-room just to show the colonel that there was no hard feeling. Colonel Spottiswoode watched him with a queer little twinkle in his eye. Presently he rose, handed Zack a fine cigar and led the clergyman away.

The Trevelyans assembled in the pantry and fell upon each other's necks. "Oh, Sister, Sister! It went off beautifully; Zack, you did *so* well."

"Yas'm, Missy, I was raised in de white folks' house."

When Miss Betsy Trevelyan reached into a cupboard and took out that decanter of whisky it certainly hurt Zack's feelings to think how luck had been agin him. He did not know it was there. She placed it on the refrigerator and Zack noted the fine bead. Were they going to leave it there? Zack felt something spring eternal in his breast. Misfortune had done her worst and was now fixing to relent. Miss Savannah, more liberal of the sisters, took up the decanter and started back to the library. Zack

produced a cough. "Please ma'am, gimme jes' a little drap." Another cough.

"Why, Uncle Zack, are you ill?"

"Yas'm, I'se been sittin' up nights wid my wife. Dese shoes is wore out so bad my foots is on de wet groun'." This much he proved by showing the shoe. "Dat's how come me got dis mis'ry."

Miss Savannah halted, then moved on again, stopped and started—with Zack shivering in suspense and subject to heart disease. She leaned against the door and held the decanter. Zack saw her glance toward the glasses. She stood there thoughtful and undecided. Zack's mouth watered. It was a crucial moment.

"Uncle Zack," she spoke slowly, "who is this son-in-law that you mentioned? I was hoping that he and his wife might come here and live."

It was no time for Zack to be temporizing—'twarn't no place for half-way measures, and he had to go the whole hog or none. "Lordy, Missy, dat ain't gwine to be no trouble. You-all is mighty good to me an' I feels like one o' de fambly. Oliver'll come up here to-morrer mornin'." Zack put on his Mona Lisa smile—and took the decanter. In trying not to hurry he spilled a few regretted drops.

"Is Oliver as good as you are?" Miss Savannah asked.

"Some folks say Oliver is better'n me, bein' more

younger and spryer dan me. But dese new-fangled niggers ain't like us old-timers. No, ma'am, dat dey ain't."

"Does he know anything about gardening?"

With liquid enthusiasm trickling down his throat Ole Reliable could not confine himself to calm and austere statements. "Gardening? Does Oliver know about gardening? You jes' ought to see dem vegetables down to our house. Oliver is got everything what grows in de groun'—an' den some more besides dat."

This fluttered the dovecote; the sisters deluged him with questions. "Does Oliver understand flowers?"

Ole Reliable smiled—a smile of indulgent pity for the Trevelyan ignorance. "Lordy, Miss, ef you 'lows Oliver to projeck wid flowers you'll hatter go out dar an' drag him in to dinner. Dat fool nigger is done wore hisself to a frazzle workin' roses an' jewraniums."

"Now, Betsy!" Miss Savannah curbed her sister's ardor. "Let Uncle Zack alone. Give him time to eat his dinner, then we shall talk it over."

Zack had made a hit—a palpable hit; and the scoffs of Mammy Liz never touched him. He ate his dinner, fully, completely, thoroughly—then placed himself at the disposal of the sisters.

With his head in the clouds and a tongue wagging

at both ends he wandered with two jubilant ladies in the garden. Happy Zack! He had one bad moment when Miss Savannah went to the rosebush into which he had dropped that gold-headed cane—that came pretty near hitching a hearse-horse to his joy-wagon. But he conjured with the magic name of Oliver.

"Oliver sho' will be proud to live in dat house. You won't know it when he gits his flowers planted; an' chickens—Lordee, Miss, I don't want to low-rate yo' chickens, dey's fine chickens, but you ought to see dem fat white 'uns what him and Calline raises." Gently, step by step, Ole Reliable led them from the fatal rosebush—just as a thrush feigns a broken wing and flaps away from its nest.

The sisters sat on the steps of their gardener's house and made their contract for the moving in of Oliver and Caroline. The house rent free, with light and wood and water; Oliver's wages twenty dollars a month and Caroline's ten. "It's so much better to have a business understanding," said Miss Savannah.

"Yas'm, dey needs a good home like dis."

Ole Reliable felt that his works were running down, bearings were getting dry, and the wheels needed another oiling; so he charmed the sisters back into the house and escaped long enough to rescue his cane from the rosebush and hide it in the front hedge.

Then he stood before them, hat in hand. "Now, Missy, I gotter be goin'. My ole 'ooman is so po'ly I hates to stay out late—I has a heap o' trouble tryin' to keep dat po' ole critter warm. Missy, couldn't you lend me a little whisky in a bottle?"

The sisters looked at each other. Ole Reliable saw their hesitancy and cinched his point: "Oliver an' Calline, dey—"

That decided the waverers; two souls with but a single thought, they went for the decanter. Ole Reliable followed into the pantry and hung upon their discussion as to the particular kind of bottle they should fill. He was not fastidious as to the shape of it, but kept an eye on the size.

"This will do very nicely; that ought to last her a long time."

"Yas'm—she ain't hardly gwine to touch dis."

Miss Betsy rushed out of the room. "Wait a minute," she called back. Zack heard her enter the garret and went cold, thinking of that gold-headed cane. But Miss Betsy came down with a quilt across her arm. Miss Savannah stopped her. "No, that's too good a quilt; we can use that ourselves—"

For once Miss Betsy asserted herself: "Charity does not consist in giving away what one does not need." She folded the quilt and laid it in Zack's arms. "This will keep your poor wife comfortable. We shall expect Oliver to-morrow morning."

"Yas'm; he'll come up here to-night ef you say so."

The sisters held a whispered consultation. "Yes," agreed Miss Betsy—"a dollar would be about right —send him away satisfied—Oliver and Caroline—"

Miss Savannah opened her purse, searched and thought and searched again—one dime, a five-dollar bill—that was all. "Uncle Zack, I'm afraid we can't make the change." Then, seeing his disappointment, she added, "But I'll send it to you at once—where do you live?"

Zack pointed down the hill. "You see dem two trees—jes' de tops—close togedder? Go straight down dis street into de bottom; soon as you pass de brickyard you'll git to dem two cottonwoods. Dat's my house, right dar."

"Of course," Miss Betsy volunteered; "we would know the place by Oliver's garden and the flowers and the white chickens."

Zack caught a quick breath. "Now, Missy, you needn't pay so much 'tention to dat garden and flowers—keep yo' eye sot on dem big trees. Neber mind —I'll come back to-morrer for dat dollar." But he looked so mournful that Miss Savannah asked: "Have you no money?"

"No, ma'am," he answered simply. It had been a red-letter day for the Misses Trevelyan. They began it on a liberal-minded, if not a lavish, basis and

Miss Savannah played the string to a finish. She thrust the five-dollar note into Zack's hand: "Get that changed—keep a dollar for yourself and hurry back."

If that bill had been a block of boiler iron it would have crumpled in Zack's clutch. "Yas'm, yas'm, I'll come right back." At the rate he started he was due back in less than one minute.

The Trevelyans stood on the gallery with their arms about each other and watched him go. Halfway to the gate he began to slacken, debating whether it were more risky to get the gold-headed cane or leave it in the hedge for somebody else. He glanced backward; their eyes followed him. He couldn't make a movement that they did not see.

Zack carried a large stock of assorted expedients. He hurried out of the gate and turned down the street. A few steps farther, directly opposite the cane, he stumbled and dropped the quilt. When Zack straightened up again he walked stiff-legged to the corner with the gold-headed treasure behind him, then struck a bee-line for home.

Two little sisters huddled on the steps planning Oliver's renaissance of their garden. In the midst of their dreaming one sweetly solemn thought came to Miss Savannah: "But, Sister, he disappointed us before."

Miss Betsy's buoyant youth rejected her sister's

unworthy suggestion. "Poor old man, he couldn't help it. If you had a sick wife and son-in-law, and no money in the house—" But Miss Savannah was already ashamed.

They watched the sunshine fading from the hills until the far-away river took on its twilight illusion —a dim gray path reaching into the shadowy stretches of futurity.

"Oh, there he is!" Miss Betsy sprang up, for Ole Reliable hobbled toward them. There were troubled lines about his mouth and he walked like a Job whose burden was more than he could bear.

"Here's de change, Missy," he said, and pocketed his own dollar. "I'se got bad news—bad news. Oliver is tuk wid a misery dat makes him carry on scand'lous—all de time hollerin' fer Calline. Maybe he'll be able to git aroun' to-morrer; least-ways, I'll come and tell you about it."

The morning morrowed and Ole Reliable did not show up; nor the next, nor the next. The sisters listened in vain for his shuffle upon the walk. Every time the gate clicked they ran out, and returned with an added disappointment. Then they began confiding fears to each other. From apprehension they passed to a certainty of evil. "Oliver must be desperately ill; maybe the poor woman is dead."

The next day was the Sabbath, day of grace and tender deeds and human charity.

"I am going to see what's the matter," announced Miss Savannah—which meant that the two would go.

Mammy cleared away their tidy dinner—a midday meal as had always been their custom. "Sister," suggested Miss Betsy, "I was thinking, if one of our friends were ill we would not go empty-handed, we—"

She needed not to complete the sentence. Miss Savannah had already gone to the storeroom and got out a covered basket. Chicken broth, smothered chicken, rice, gelatin, various delicacies were put into the basket and covered with whitest napery. "Negroes notice these little things," remarked Miss Betsy with a smile.

Mammy choked on her disapproval, but said nothing: "Dem sho' is two hard-headed chillun."

When they were ready to leave Mammy put on her hat. "Lemme hab de basket. You-all can't tote dat through de streets on a Sunday."

Miss Savannah rebuked her gently: "Mammy, this is not like going to market—*I* shall carry the basket."

With serene and decorous steps they went down the hill as Ole Reliable had directed. They passed the brickyard; two tall cottonwoods rose straight ahead and there was no missing the house. It was Miss Savannah who first began to feel that there was

something lacking in the landscape. It was as if somebody had reached into the view and cut a slice out of it. She kept looking for Oliver's garden, the flowers, the clean white chickens. Those two tall trees checked up with her mental list, but the garden-spot failed to tally. Weeds and cockleburs grew where vegetables should have been. She stopped. "Sister, this can not be the place." Miss Betsy also looked puzzled; her eyes wandered and came back unsatisfied. Behind the two tall trees on the cabin gallery sat a negro woman—round-faced and generous-breasted—eating out of a pan. She couldn't be Caroline nor Zack's weakly wife.

"Oh," exclaimed Miss Betsy, pointing with a slim, gloved finger, "there's our quilt hanging in the window." Then she looked again at the woman. "Sister, that is Aunt Selina, Mrs. Ballard's cook: let us go in and ask her."

They passed through the gate, which, like a drunken man, clung with one hinge to the post. The woman rose and came to the edge of the gallery. "Well, I 'clar ef dar ain't Miss 'Vannah an' Miss Betsy—what's you-all doin' way down here?"

"Good evening, Aunt Selina; do you know where Uncle Zack Foster lives?"

"Yas'm, he lives right here."

"Is his wife any better?" they demanded in one breath. "We brought some nourishment for her."

"His wife?" Selina gave one backward glance into the house, where Zack was peeping through the window. "Now, Miss 'Vannah, didn't you know I war Zack's wife?"

"You!" they exclaimed; "but you are not ill."

"Me—sick!" Selina burst into a laugh: "No, ma'am; I ain't never been sick a whole day in my life."

Dazed and bewildered the Misses Trevelyan set their basket on the gallery. "Oliver?—how is Oliver?"

Selina quit laughing and looked into the house. Zack shook his head vigorously at her. Nevertheless Selina answered:

"Oliver? He's dead."

The two little ladies folded their helpless hands—commiseration, regret—they could not express it all. Almost mechanically they repeated, "Dead? Dead?" They had come too late. Charity lagged on the way, while Death outstripped her.

"When did Oliver die? Poor, poor Caroline!"

It was Selina's turn to look bewildered. "Oliver? Jes' lemme study a minute, Miss 'Vannah. Oliver died de time o' de yaller fever—dat's been six years ago. Calline, she married agin dat same fall. We don't know whar Calline is at."

The sisters stood mute. Faith as strong as theirs is difficult to destroy. "You must be mistaken.

Uncle Zack Foster came to our house on Thursday last and agreed that Oliver was to be our gardener and Caroline the cook. They were to begin the next morning. Is there any other Zack Foster in this neighborhood?"

"Now, Miss 'Vannah"—Selina laughed outright —" 'twouldn't be no room in one neighborhood for two sech niggers as Zack. He come home dat night wid a quilt an' —" She almost mentioned the gold-headed cane, but Zack's luck had changed and the woman held her tongue. "Miss 'Vannah, is Zack done hired Oliver to you-all, an' him dead fer six years? Ain't dat de beatenest nigger trick? Zack! Zack!" She turned and stepped within the house just as Zack squeezed through the back door.

The Trevelyans wheeled like indignant mocking-birds, marched out and forgot their basket. Selina followed them as far as the gate, apologizing that they ought not to blame her for Ole Reliable's business operations.

When Zack became assured that they were gone and nobody was looking he darted out of the house and snatched the basket. Selina strode up so wrathfully that the steps creaked. Zack backed into a corner with half a chicken in his hand.

"Zack, you's de out-lyinest nigger—hirin' Oliver an' Calline to dem ladies. You oughter be—" Then Selina caught a whiff of mollifying odors from the

basket. Zack saw that his luck had turned and boldly played the limit.

"Shut up, Seliny; don't come skull-draggin' wid me on er empty stummick. Miss Savannah she say, jesso: 'Uncle Zack, you been so good to us I'm gwine to send you a basket,' an' dar 'tis. Dat's what comes o' knowin' how to treat quality folks. Try some o' dat soup."

Selina took possession of the basket, lifted it to the table and sat with her mighty arms around it. Zack edged into a chair and moved up, inch by inch. Full of chicken broth and charity, Selina smiled as she asked: "Zack, how come you tole 'em all dat passel o' foolishness?"

"Lordy, chile, I war jes' runnin' on 'bout Oliver. When dey got deir heart sot on 'im I nacherly couldn't deny 'em nuthin'!"

CHAPTER III

THE DRIFT OF THE GOLDEN DOG

AUNT SELINA, with a ring of grease around her fat lips, sat on her steps and sopped gravy out of a pan. She also stared at the rent collector.

"Mr. Musgrave, I sont Zack to yo' office wid dat money las' Saddy night an'—"

The collector shook his head.

Selina set down the pan deliberately, then rose and squared herself: "Den hear *me* talk: De minit Zack comes home I'm gwine to 'tend to his case. Atter I gits through wid 'im, ef he's able, he's gwine to take you dat rent. Mind you, I said *ef* he's able."

Musgrave smiled and went away; Selina neither smiled nor went.

Corporal Zack Foster—everybody, white and black, called him Ole Reliable—swaggered homeward, swinging the gold-headed cane, which he had borrowed from the Misses Trevelyan without their knowledge and meant to return when they were not looking. In spite of his frazzled coat and dilapidated hat, Zack impressed the laity with that gold-headed cane.

Ole Reliable's weather eye detected a gale from the way that Selina craft was rocking. So he reefed all sails, furled the gold-headed cane and made himself tidy for a squall. He would have steered for the open, but Selina had the pan.

Having eyes for nothing else, Zack forgot his feud with Jim Bowman's sneaky dog next door, with the black spot over his eye. Spot didn't forget; Spot worked overtime studying up ways to remember. Zack passed the hole in Jim's fence and Spot sallied out for a surprise. Zack hustled into his own gate, slashing behind him with the cane. He made his entrance comical enough, but Selina refused to be diverted. "Whar's dat two dollars I gin you to pay de rent?"

"I paid it to Mr. Musgrave."

"Zack, you's a liar—you'd ruther tell a lie on credik dan de troof fer cash."

Zack hated these family jars, and amiably declined to be led into an argument. Instead of taking issue with Selina he sidled up to the pan and reached for a batter-cake; Selina tackled: "No, you don't—nary bite; I'm tired bendin' over a hot stove, an' totin' vittles from de white folks' house, while you loafs aroun' de catfish stand preachin' Scriptures. Whyn't you quit meddlin' wid de Lord's bizness an' pay some 'tention to yo' own?"

"Dat's all right—"

"Co'se it's all right. De rent c'llector an' de 'stallment man don't bother you none. Dey don't come 'round here axin' 'Whar's Zack?'—not ef dey's got good sense. Dey always 'quires 'Whar's Selina?' "

Zack kept one eye on the pan, but Selina kept both hands on it.

"Here 'tis high-water time an' you might be makin' good money catchin' drif'wood an' drawin' shingles. Instid o' dat you's prancin' roun' wid a walkin'-stick, proud as a monkey wid a tin tail."

Zack made a grimace of patient suffering. "I got de mis'ry in my side."

"Mis'ry, huh!" The big woman sprang to her feet and Zack dodged. "Mis'ry! Ain't I seen you at dat street fair, wid yo' hat cocked on one side, hittin' dat peg wid a sledge-hammer an' bettin' my rent money you could hit harder dan any man in Vicksburg? Mis'ry! Huh! Nex' thing you gwine to hit is de big road—git out o' here."

"Seliny, ain't I yo' husban'?"

"Husban's is as husban's does. I'm gwine to eat *my* dinner at de white folks' house."

To emphasize the threat Selina snatched her chair and pan to the far end of the gallery, while Zack huddled in a limp pile on the steps.

In other periods of petulance Zack had been forced to wait for the second table. But the worst was yet to come. Selina finished her dinner, then stepped

off the end of the gallery and walked to Jim Bowman's fence.

"Here, Spot! Here, Spot!" Zack's eyes bulged at this excruciating insult. Selina deliberately, maliciously, teetotally emptied that pan—scraped that pan—over the fence into Jim Bowman's yard. Spot gobbled the gift from Heaven without a wag.

Selina countermarched to the gallery, washed the pan and slammed it on the table while Zack shuddered at the meanness of a woman's soul stripped bare. He did not glance behind him as he stumbled out of the gate and turned toward the river.

It was unchivalric, the thing that Spot did—low-down dog-treachery prompted it. Zack was not pestering him; yet Spot squeezed through the fence and dashed out again. Zack fought like a rat at bay until his frazzled coat-tails passed the corner. Spot trotted home with his tail in the air; Selina held her fat sides; and Zack backed off with a heart for hell to make its garden in.

Zack shuffled on aimlessly, head bent down, hands in his pockets and the gold-headed cane under his arm. Out of the tail of his eye he saw a woman—and Zack had a reputation. He straightened up and brought out the cane with a flourish. "Good-evenin', Sis Hoby, how'd de s'ciety 'lection come out?"

It was Zack's day for insult. He was discussing official business wid a "cullud lady" when a "white

'ooman" interrupted him by calling from her gallery: "Uncle! Oh, Uncle! Please come in here and help us move some furniture. I will give you a quarter."

"Who? Me? You couldn't 'a' saw dis here gold-headed walkin'-stick when you axed me to move furnicher fer two bits. Huh!"

He bore the cane in front of him and strode away like an indignant lictor marching before some Roman consul.

His feet fell into that familiar path which led him to the river. In this mood he loved to sit and watch the drifting logs go by. They kind o' went along easy and nothing bothered 'em. Near the top of the river bank stood a shanty—a mere shed, with roof of cypress bark—under which two negroes were making shingles.

"Good-evenin', Dunc; good-evenin', Jocaster;" Zack nodded glumly and sat down in the sunshine. Dunc looked up: "Here's Ole Reliable; the very man we want."

Dunc worked as he talked, stripping off shavings with a draw-knife. "Me and Jocaster is been tryin' to find you."

"What you want wid me?"

"We's got to make ten thousand shingles an' git 'em done fer de nex' trip o' de boat. It's gwine to push us mightily, an' I says to Jocaster: 'Ole Re-

liable is de man we wants; ain't no nigger can pull a draw-knife wid him.' "

Zack brightened up; somebody was beginning to appreciate him.

The river was rising rapidly and must have surprised some timber men in the swamp. Numbers of cypress logs drifted swiftly down, and all that a negro had to do was to catch them with a skiff and make shingles—at four dollars a thousand. Dunc laid aside his knife, walked out and explained the situation to Zack—the best shingle-maker in Vicksburg, who could draw upward of two thousand in a day.

Ole Reliable swept the river with experienced eye; it was said he could recognize a cypress log as far away as he could see a ripple. Dunc flattered skilfully and Ole Reliable's mangled bosom began to heal. "I'll jes' try a few," he remarked offhandedly.

He stood his cane in a corner, sat down on Dunc's "hoss" and picked up the draw-knife. With dexterous ease he turned off shingle after shingle, peeling the thin, wet cypress as if he were paring an apple. "Dat's de way to make shingles."

"Now," suggested Dunc, "ef we finishes dem shingles we gits a extry price. Dem niggers yonder, Shrimp an' Peter, is workin' agin us an' 'lows dey's gwine to roll us fer our job. Shrimp he's mighty spry wid a skiff, but you kin beat 'im, an' dat's what

we wants you fer. Take dis extry draw-knife an'—"

Zack arose from the horse and resigned the draw-knife. "I ain't able to work; I got a mis'ry in my side."

Dunc and Jocaster urged him until Ole Reliable moved out of the shanty and ended the discussion. Filling his pipe he took up his walking-stick, ambled down the river and made himself comfortable in the shade of a stranded houseboat.

"Hey, dere!" called Shrimp. "Is you goin' to work fer dem niggers?"

"No, I ain't got time," said Zack, and sat pondering upon the placid river, with its circling eddy that widened at his feet.

Logs and brush and fallen trees came floating down; some were caught by the eddy and some escaped on the farther side. "Dar goes a lot o' fence." Zack knew what that meant—overflow and trouble in the swampy lands above.

Presently Zack noticed a splendid log that came whirling around the point. "Fifteen or twenty thousan' shingles in dat log," he estimated with professional eye and watched its stately progress. Something floated behind the log—a small bridge? a barn door?—no. "Huh! somebody's gate must 'a' washed away." Zack looked again, rose to his feet, peered across the water, then darted down the bank to Jocaster's skiff.

Shrimp saw the quick movement and guessed there was an extra fine log in sight. Being nearer to the water he tumbled the oars into his own skiff and gave it a shove with Zack immediately behind him. The men from the rival shanties left their work to watch the race—with a fair start and Shrimp slightly in the lead. Dunc nudged Jocaster: "Jes' watch 'im—I tole you 'twarn't no nigger on dis river kin pull a skiff wid Ole Reliable. He's gwine ter ketch dat log, an' it's wuth thirty dollars ef it's wuth a nickel."

Shrimp got a running start, two lengths ahead, but Ole Reliable did not worry. Excitement will not rush a skiff. His oars rose and fell with the measured sweep of a sea-bird's wings. Lightly he rested them on the surface, feathering in their return. By the subtle instinct of a river-man he knew this treacherous eddy, took advantage of its flow, avoided its counter-currents and skimmed the stiller waters. Inch by inch he gained on Shrimp; now they were almost touching; now the nose of his boat went creeping steadily along the other's side. Now they were nose and nose—then his long strokes shoved him ahead. A cheer went up from the bank. "Go it, Ole Reliable!" shouted Dunc.

Peter yelled at Shrimp: "Why don't you pull—is you tied to a stump?" Shrimp laid back with all his power and twisted an oar out of the lock; his boat

swung around and lost a length. Then he jerked himself along in spurts; but the race was lost.

Shrimp stopped and rested on his oars, watching for Zack to catch the log. Then a queer thing happened. Zack rowed around the log without breaking his stroke. Shrimp stared, but did not argue with good fortune; he snatched up his oars, bumped into the log and made it fast to the stern. Having done this he could watch Zack, just as the astounded men on shore were doing.

Ole Reliable passed the log some ten or twelve lengths, and there, just as he had thought, was a floating gate; on it lay a wretched dog. He drew up alongside, folded his coat and laid it in the stern. He lifted the dog tenderly into his skiff, then turned and pulled straight to the landing-place.

Dunc and Jocaster burst out together: "Dat's de finest piece o' cypress what's passed down dis river in a year—dis here nigger goes right by it an' picks up a old dog."

When Zack had made fast he snapped his fingers at the dog, which was too weak to lift its head. Zack bore him gently up the hill and carefully laid him on a pile of shavings.

"Zack, why didn't you fotch dat log—you was right dere at it?"

Zack didn't glance up: "Den Shrimp would 'a' got dis dog."

The dog lay without a sign of life, and two disgusted negroes watched Zack hovering over it.

"What you want wid a dead dog?"

"He ain't dead."

"He's mighty nigh it. Looks like a coon hide stretched over some barrel hoops."

Ole Reliable stood up: "Is dis yo' dog, or my dog?"

A buzzard circled round and settled on the fence. Dunc watched the ominous bird, then remarked scornfully to the dog, "I see yo' finish." Then he went heartlessly about his work.

Zack felt the dog over, from his snapping-turtle head to the enormous feet: "'Tain't nuthin' wrong wid dis dog—jes' hongry." Upon first impulse Zack wrapped the animal in his coat, took him up and started home. Then he stopped, considered the domestic situation, laid his burden down again and thought. There wasn't a thing to eat at home. "Ef I jes' had de two bits from dat lady—" Dogs can not be fed with quarters that have passed. The grasshopper turned to the ant: "Dunc, lemme have a dime right quick."

Dunc wadded both hands in his pockets and kept them there: "Dar's a nigger, made an' handed down —widout a cent o' money and won't take a job."

Zack begged and wheedled and promised until Dunc gave in, on the dog's account: "All right; you

set down an' make shingles like hell-a-beatin'-tan-bark whilst I git a can o' soup fer de dog. An' you ain't gwine to quit till I says quit."

"I sho' will—I'll draw shingles till my arms drap off."

Ole Reliable took his seat at the "hoss" and Dunc hurried off. Presently he came back with a bucket of warm soup. Ole Reliable jumped up, and Dunc said: "No, you set down; I'm feedin' dis dog."

"Dunc, lemme feed 'im, please; I loves to feed 'im. Ain't he my dog?" Ole Reliable begged so earnestly that Dunc let him have the spoon; he opened the dog's mouth and put in two or three swallows. Dunc caught his arm. "Dat's enough—he's like a leaky bucket; you got to pour gradual an' let 'im swell. Give 'im some more in about fifteen minutes. Now make shingles."

Dunc bargained shrewder than he thought—fifteen minutes' work between every dose of soup. Zack labored like a madman.

Dunc nudged Jocaster: "Ef dat soup holds out we'll git our shingles done."

After the third dose Zack noticed a relaxation of the limbs; the eyes opened and closed again. "Ef he had a tail he sho' would be a-waggin' it."

Dunc whispered to Jocaster, then went over, examined the dog, and looked wise. "Zack, dis dog is got distemper—needs some o' dat medicine what comes in a big red bottle."

"How much do it cost?" asked Zack.

"Fo' bits a bottle at de drugsto'."

Dunc knew precisely what Zack was going to do, but he returned to his "hoss" and suggested nothing. Ole Reliable promptly figured out the problem for himself.

"Dunc, len' me fo' bits—I'll work it out," he promised.

As Dunc did not seem enthusiastic Zack flanked up his proposition. "Dat dog is goin' to be sick two or three days, an' I hates to loaf aroun' doin' nuthin'. I might jes' as well draw shingles. Of co'se dey'll be yo' shingles."

Dunc nodded his head as if he hated to do it. Then Zack sat down, put the love of a dog behind his skill, and his elbows moved like a well-oiled machine.

The long, thin shavings fell from his knife; shingle after shingle fell upon the pile. "What you gwine to name de dog?" questioned Jocaster. Zack considered a while, then chuckled: "He's a drif'wood dog, ain't he? 'Drif' fer short."

The five-o'clock whistles blew; workshops and factories poured out their hands; the tin-bucket brigade started homeward for a hot supper. Zack never slipped a cog. Dunc and Jocaster laid aside their tools; Zack smiled at Drif and worked faster. "'Tain't nigh dark; I'll turn off a few mo' shingles whilst I kin see."

When the two men were ready to go Zack looked over his shoulder. "Dunc," he said, "len' me a dime; I wants to git a snack fer myself."

Nobody would have believed it—especially Zack—but at the end of the third week he was still working, just beginning to get his hand in. The cypress dwindled and the pile of shingles grew; with a mountain of shavings on one side and a striped bulldog on the other. Zack whistled away, peeled away and piled away. Dunc and Jocaster held their breath, afraid to speak of the miracle.

The rotund result of his labor showed up in Drif, who began to resemble a stuffed dog—squat, square, with a bent leg at each corner like a grand piano. "Ain't he a beaut?" Zack demanded of everybody that passed. But he never stopped work; it cost money to finance a proposition like Drif. Drif had been promoted from soup to scraps, from scraps to tiny bits of meat; now it came in raw chunks straight from the butcher. "Nex' week I'm gwine to put gunpowder in it to make 'im fierce."

The brindle brute, with jaws like a bear-trap, cringed at these negroes' feet, flattened himself against the earth and twitched the stump of his tail. Before everybody else he covered every inch of ground he stood on—and contested the rest.

Zack had no time to think much about it, but a growing pile of dollars in his pocket kept pace with

the pile of shavings. Those shavings were cool, and Drif burrowed into their shady side. Nobody could see him, and that is how Jim Bowman's dog happened to make his fatal error.

Jim, being Zack's neighbor, and hearing this false report about a steady job, came down with Spot to investigate. Maybe Selina sent him.

Zack was whistling at his work—Spot hated that whistle. He cocked up his ears and crept forward. He did not see Drif—he only saw a noble chance to grab Zack from the rear. The first intimation of trouble was a yelp of terror and a flutter among the shavings. All was over except the shaking, and Drif was attending to that. Zack sprang up with the drawing-knife. Jim Bowman dashed in and kicked Drif—then wished he hadn't, for the dog turned on him. Zack threw himself on top of the infuriated animal and clasped him round the body. "Run, Jim, run; my holt's a-slippin'." Jim scuffled up the bank, hustled across a vacant lot and flung himself over a wire fence.

Zack managed to tie Drif and pacify him. While he was sitting there offering a few post-mortem suggestions to Spot, Jim's conciliatory voice came over the hill:

"Zack, please suh, fetch my dog."

Nothing could have pleased Zack more. He took Spot by the scruff of the neck, dragged him up the

hill and hoisted him over the fence with a smile of undertaker's sympathy.

"Jim, I couldn't help it. Spot would a bit me ef Drif hadn't cotch 'im fust." Jim scowled and dragged his dog away.

Zack capered back to the shanty and patted his preserver—hugged him—called him bad names and cooed to him. "Now, Drif, you set here and be good whilst I goes to de butcher shop fer a dollar's wuth o' po'terhouse steak. I don't begrudge you nuthin' dis day."

Ole Reliable had not gone twenty paces before he was startled by a growl. He turned. A white man was kneeling beside the dog. Dunc and Jocaster sat paralyzed to see this man opening Drif's mouth with his bare hands.

Zack came tumbling down the hill and tiptoed cautiously into the shanty: "Good fellow, Drif—good fellow."

The stranger glanced up and smiled: "Uncle, this is a mighty fine dog."

"Yas suh; yas suh; but I 'spec you better let 'im alone. He mought hurt you."

"No, I guess not." And the stranger began punching Drif in the sides with his fingers, stretching his legs and forcing his mouth and reëxamining his jaws. Zack gasped: "Boss, you must be kind o' used to dogs."

"I have handled many a one," the stranger nodded.

He was a youngish-looking man with an old face, a boy, perhaps, with the experience of fifty, or an old man with the eyes of a boy—Zack could not be sure. He wore a striped shirt, a gold stirrup for a watch-charm, and the air of a man at home most anywhere. The stranger rose and prodded Drif a time or two.

"Where did you get him, Uncle?"

Terror seized upon Ole Reliable; maybe this man had come to claim his dog; maybe—

"My brother raised 'im out in Hinds County; dey been had 'im fer de longest kind o' time."

"How about his pedigree?"

"Mighty good, suh; mighty good—eats everything he kin git."

"I mean what strain is he?"

"Dunno, Cunnel; 'pears like some kind of a bulldog to me."

The stranger kept smiling. "Oh, yes; he's a bulldog all right." Then he mused to himself: "Curious; I did not think there were two dogs like that anywhere in America. Old man, would you sell him to me for—say twenty-five dollars?"

"Now, Cunnel, you don't want me to sell my dog."

"Fifty dollars?"

Zack shook his head.

"A hundred?"

Zack drew a long breath. "Cunnel, you oughtn't to be offerin' me all dat fer Drif, 'cause dat keeps me studyin' fust about de money an' wishin' I had it, an' den studyin' about Drif and wishin' I had 'im. But he wouldn't go wid you."

"Oh, yes, he'll go." The stranger spoke with quiet assurance, and Zack wasn't really hurt until then.

Spick Winslow took his seat upon a bundle of shingles and studied every movement of the dog. "He's the best I've ever seen; bound to be of that blood; but how did he get here? Old man, I'm willing to back my judgment of your dog. Would you let him fight—"

"Cunnel, you sho' is talkin' joyful fer Drif." Zack laughed uproariously and slapped his leg.

Winslow did not show equal enthusiasm. He was not planning a pink tea for Drif's amusement. With him it was largely a matter of business, coupled with a certain sportsmanlike pride in launching a possible Unknown. "Suppose I should arrange a fight, would you let me train your dog and put him in condition?"

"What's dat?" Zack asked.

"He has never been fed properly, has had no training and his full strength is not developed. I'll make a new dog of him."

"Cunnel, I'se treated Drif de bes' I knows how."

"Yes, but it's all in knowing how."

Spick Winslow smiled, and when he smiled it made Zack feel that the man knew a whole lot more than he was telling to anybody. "Of course," he added, "you would go to New Orleans or St. Louis and take care of him."

"Cunnel, when does we leave?"

Winslow drew Zack aside and cautioned him; their training-quarters were to be secret. Two nights after that an insolent little gasolene boat stuck in her nose beside the shingle shed. Zack crept mysteriously aboard with Drif and his gold-headed cane. The boat backed out into the fog and nobody knew which way she went.

Ole Reliable had disappeared and the clandestine manner thereof gave Dunc and Jocaster a rag to chew upon for two long months. "Dunc, what you reckon is happened to Zack?"

"Don't know—he'll come back when he gits broke, an' dat ain't gwine to be long."

"He said dat white man was gwine to put up fer him an' de dog."

"Den we'll look fer 'im when de vittles gives out!"

They were both good guessers, but they both guessed wrong. One glorious morning Drif came bounding down the bank like a brindled ball of rubber and tore up the shingle shed before the negroes knew what had happened. He jumped all over them,

licked their faces, knocked down their "hosses," scattered shingles, and capered around like a puppy. City life and dog-hostlers had made him a magnificent brute—slick, shiny, with stripes like a tiger and muscles sliding under a skin of silk. Modest of gladiatorial laurels he prostrated himself before his delighted friends.

Zack strutted down the hill with a leash in his hand.

"Looky yonder, Dunc! Ain't Zack somethin' fer a nigger to look at!" And Zack was. A derby hat perched on the southwest corner of his head, a checkerboard suit flapped round his thin body, and a red necktie fluttered. But those low-quartered shoes! Those rolled-up trousers! And the gay green clockwork of his socks! "Here, you fellers," he shouted, "knock off work and less have a good time. Take a seegar?"

Being a holiday occasion the three sat down to smoke and talk it over. "Did Drif git into a fight?" Dunc inquired.

"Fight? Fight?" Zack puffed his smoke on the off side. "Naw. Dey called deirselves fightin' but 'twarn't nuthin' more'n killin' rats wid a tarrier. Drif kotch holt and shuck 'em—dat was all. De onliest trouble was gittin' him tore loose." Zack blew out a prodigious cloud of smoke and flicked the pile of shavings with his leash.

"Is you come home fer good?" Jocaster asked.

"Naw; jes' fer pleasure—on a vacation. My main bizness is in N'Yawleens, Memphis, an' St. Looey an' sech places." Zack crossed his legs, dangled his green socks and rattled some coins. The jingle caught Dunc's ear. "How'd you come out—is you got a pocket full o' money?"

"Wuss'n dat, nigger, wuss'n dat—I got a dog full o' money. He's a gole dog, wid his hide stuffed full o' greenbacks. Cunnel Winslow an' me went pardners. Drif wins de purses, Cunnel keeps de honor and throws me de money. Nigger, you ain't never seed no money—flyin' roun' same as leaves in de fall. Takes yo' breff away—till you gits used to it."

Having got quite used to it Zack nonchalantly tossed away his half-smoked cigar and lighted another. "Reckon I'll git rested in a week or so—an' den go back. I'm gwine up now an' look at de ole town."

Zack hadn't paraded three blocks on Washington Street before Selina knew it. Nigger news doesn't need to be toted—it simply permeates and pervades. Selina took another woman for company and rambled toward the river.

"Bless goodness, ef dar ain't Zack, all dressed up."

Zack turned. "Dese is my ev'y-day clo'es; I'se jes' got home."

"Got home? Is you been away?"

"Nowhar wuth speakin' of—jes' a pleasure trip to N'Yawleens an' St. Looey."

Zack let his light so shine upon that other woman that she saw his good socks and glorified his wife which was beside him. Selina grinned, showed her gleaming teeth and basked in that other woman's jealousy. Negligently, casually, incidentally Zack kept clinking those unconsidered trifles in his pocket until Selina got the fidgets. But his artistic temperament had no thought for sordid finance. "Dis here river," he remarked, "puts me in mind o' N'Yawleens." Then he made a grandstand play. Gazing across the river he absent-mindedly removed a hand from his pocket and laid one of the coins in Selina's open palm. "Take dis dollar an' buy a dollar's wuth o' oysters fer supper."

Selina stared at the coin—awe-stricken and breathless. "Zack—Zack—dis ain't no dollar—hit's a twenty-dollar gole piece."

"Go 'long—dat's jes' de same."

"What you want me to do wid dis money?"

Jocund mirth sported around Zack's lips. "Chuck it at de jaybirds, buy some ice-cream—plenty mo' whar dat come from."

Zack progressed homeward between the other woman and Selina, with Drif tugging on the leash and dragging their triumphal chariot. They bowed unaffectedly to the right and left, and all the neigh-

bors stared. Jim Bowman leaned over the fence, and Zack tied his dog inside for fear of poison.

They had a most affluent week—music, merriment and combat—with a continuous phonograph running on the gallery and a serial dog-fight running in the street.

Several dog-owners were illogical persons and licked Zack. But he paid for hauling off all dogs and discharged all fines in lordly fashion. The week vanished in a whirling dream—then come the alarm clock and the awakening.

"Seliny, whar's dat twenty-dollar gole piece?"

"Us spent it long ago; you ain't broke?"

"Naw, not what you might call broke, jes' a little short o' change. Don't make no diffunce. Cunnel Winslow he say to send him a despatch when I gits tired o' stayin' home and he'll despatch back whar to meet him at."

"Hit better be in good walkin' distance," suggested Selina.

Zack faced her. "Dar you goes—soon as de money gives out you commences bustin' caps an' throwin' slams."

"Shucks, Zack, can't you take a joke?"

"'Tain't no joke."

Zack sat moodily on the gallery, while Drif wallowed in a cool place under the steps. Whenever a stray dog came along and Drif needed practice, Zack

whistled softly and Drif did the rest. Doing the rest —with these country dogs—was such a languid performance that it hardly furnished Drif sufficient exercise to keep up his appetite.

"Looky yonder, Seliny, what's dat?"

It was the queerest wagon Zack had ever seen outside of a circus—a big red wagon all boxed in. A man with long hair rode beside it, sombrero hat and fringed leggings. Another one drove the wagon. Selina came to the door. "That's Blackfoot Ben, what sells corn salve and pulls teeth."

Zack had no eye for Blackfoot Ben nor for the vicious mustang that he rode. His entire range of vision took in nothing but a dog—a spindle-legged, gangling yaller cur that slunk along beneath the wagon. Zack scrutinized every dog he saw with critical dissection. This one wouldn't furnish two shakes and a shuffle for Drif. She had too much daylight under her; no jaws; her nose was too sharp; she had too much hair. All the high points of a fighter were obviously absent. It would be like chasing a rabbit, and Drif would gain no credit.

Something went wrong with the harness and Ben's wagon stopped at the corner. Disappointed at the prospect of no fight, Zack strolled out with Jim Bowman and watched the proceedings.

The skimpy dog lay down under the wagon with ears set forward. She knew her business—nobody

must touch that wagon. Once, when Blackfoot Ben passed near, he stooped and stroked her head. She barely moved a brushy tail.

"Mister," asked Zack, "is that yo' pup?"

Ben nodded.

Zack took a step nearer the wagon; the dog showed her teeth. "She 'pears like a slim dog—what breed is dat?"

"Her father was a greyhound and her mother a Scotch collie."

"One o' dese half-an'-half dogs—is dey fighters?"

"No, no; sheep-herders and runners."

"Mister, I 'spec' you better put her on top o' dat wagon till she gits past my house—I got a uncommon bad bulldog."

"You have a bad bulldog, eh?"

Long after the calamity Zack remembered how Ben had smiled. But Zack's foresights were not so good as his hindsights. He felt too sorry in advance for Ben's dog.

"Honest, Mister, I can't hol' dat bulldog o' mine when he sees a strange dog. He'll nacherly tear yo' pup all to pieces."

"I guess not—Nellie takes care of herself."

Zack chuckled inwardly, but being prudent he remembered something. Blackfoot Ben gave exhibitions in fancy shooting, steer-roping and knife-throwing. Zack might become the shootee, ropee or

throwee. "Mister," he spoke earnestly, "please suh, put dat pup out o' de way."

"Nellie looks out for herself." Ben moved on with the wagon.

"Mister, you won't think hard o' me ef sumpin happens?" Zack called after him.

Ben turned in his saddle. "Dog-fights is dog-fights, and women squabbles is women squabbles. Men ain't got no business meddlin'."

Them was Zack's sentiments—he being unscrappily inclined. "I done tole 'im; you heerd me, didn't you, Jim?" he remarked, and walked into his own yard. As Zack mounted the steps he kicked against them and whistled softly. Drif crawled out, stretched himself, then caught sight of the scraggy dog walking his street without a permit. Like an avalanche the tawny beast hurled himself across the yard, darted out of the gate and—

Zack thought he was going to see something fancy in the way of a foot-race, but he didn't. "Golly! dat pup is so skeert she jes' nacherly can't run."

Whatever might have been Nellie's secret motive, she did not run. The wagon went on and left her crouching in the road. She faced the bulldog and—one more instant Drif would have caught his fatal throat hold, which meant a shake and a funeral. But Drif didn't seem to catch on to anything. There wasn't anything for him to catch on to. At the in-

stant when by all fair rules he should have grabbed her throat, Nellie sprang directly over him, her head bent down, and her needle teeth gashed a furrow in his back. Drif stopped, stupefied—and blinked. His enemy had vanished, but only for the scintilla of a second. Like a flash she came back again, by the overhead route, and split his ear on the way. Drif was not a creature of original ideas. He was conservative. This was an innovation and it took time to soak in. While it was soaking Nellie made several more trips back and forth, leaving a record of her passage. Drif followed the fighting trade without malice, but Nellie's methods began to irritate him. He made a savage dash—at a shadow. Nellie wasn't there. Nellie took a section of flank in going over and slashed his neck in her return. Drif yelped —it was the first time Zack had ever heard him utter a sound. Ben was still smiling: "Old man, hadn't you better put that pup on top of your house until Nellie gets by?"

Zack wiped his face and answered hotly: "You jes' wait a minit; he'll ketch holt directly."

Nellie bounded back and forth, her eyes flashing and every hair on end. Like a whizzing rapier her teeth left bloody stripes behind them. "Your dog looks like he'd been run through a gin, don't he, old man?" suggested Ben.

"Drif ain't begun yit."

"Now he's begun," retorted Ben. Drif had uncorked his howling apparatus. First that yelp, short and sharp; then a whine; then he let loose a continuous howl. He ran, but the air was full of gray-and-yellow demons that bodaciously stripped off his hide. Drif, being a bulldog, had no business to fight with birds. He dodged, doubled and ducked from one side of the road to the other, then took to the high weeds. This was no protection; what Drif needed was a barrel with the top nailed down.

"Mister, oh, Mister," called Zack; "please suh, call yo' dog."

"Can't do nothing with Nellie when she sees a strange dog."

Then Drif did a peculiar thing—no dog in the history of the pit ever resorted to such strategy. He lay flat on his back in the thickest part of the weeds, with all four feet in the air, like a wooden dog out of Noah's ark.

Jim Bowman fell down in the dust of the road, rolled over and laughed. Selina leaned against the fence with staring eyes.

"Come, Nellie!" Ben snapped his fingers. Nellie dropped her beautiful ears, loped off on her dainty legs and trotted on beneath the wagon.

Zack went out and led his discouraged gladiator back into the yard. "Seliny, git some hot water."

"What fer?"

"To wash 'im."

"I ain't got nuthin' to do wid 'im."

"Seliny, Drif done de bes' he knowed how. He warn't brought up to no sech rules as dat."

Zack got the water himself, bathed Drif tenderly and soothed him in a language that both of them understood. He was not seriously hurt, only minced with a hash-chopper.

After that Drif lost his taste for fighting; he wanted peace and plenty of it. Zack discovered this the next morning when a setter pup wobbled past their fence. Drif moved closer to Zack without a growl.

Two days later a middle-sized dog strolled into their gate, and Drif retreated to the gallery. Zack blamed this on the scarcity of the victuals that Selina toted: "It warn't enough fer three people."

For a week the three of them hung on the edge of a rupture—then the crisis.

Selina sat in her chair sopping the last gravy out of her pan; Zack rested on the steps and Drif lay within the gate at his feet. He never ventured outside looking for trouble. A flop-eared hound had blundered into their back yard. Zack scared him with a yell, and he bolted toward the front gate. But Drif saw him coming, got the lead and held it, headed straight for the river, and didn't come back.

"Huh!" said Selina in disgust; "he's gone to de shingle shed."

Zack reached for his hat. "Whar you gwine?" Selina demanded.

"To fetch 'im home."

"Hol' on, Zack; 'tain't no use beatin' roun' de bush no longer—you can't keep dat dog in dis house. My white folks is grumblin' about de grub."

There were certain known quantities in Ole Reliable's mathematics. White folks' grub was one. He had come to a parting of the ways; his grub lay in one direction and his dog in the other. Zack turned his back upon his grub and followed the path to the shingle shed. There was Drif, crouching between Dunc and Jocaster.

"What's de matter wid dis dog?" inquired Dunc.

"Drif is feelin' po'ly." The animal crawled over and licked Zack's hand.

"Dunc, is you-all got any more orders fer shingles?"

"Plenty of 'em."

Before Zack sat down at the "hoss" he took off his red tie—which represented sporty ideas—and threw it into the river.

CHAPTER IV

HE J'INES THE ARMY, J'INES THE JAIL, AND J'INES THE COTTON PICKERS

NOBODY could expect Ole Reliable to stick at his shingle-making when there was a parade in town. He didn't.

It was a steamy, dusty day. The sun glared through a frowning sky which promised a deluge; puffs of wind came fretfully, picked up the hot dust and spread it out again. Mules panted beneath their head-shades, men's collars wilted; and flies stuck close. The stifled scream of a fife fought with the choking rattle of a snare-drum in a cloud of dust that moved slowly down Crawford Street.

"Huh! Gran' Army Republicans!" remarked a sweaty drayman; " 'tain't no funeral, 'tain't nuthin'; jes' turnin' out to be a turnin' out."

Behind the dust cloud marched a long column of negroes, two by two—a wavering straggling line of dusty blue. Most of the men were black, with gray dust on their faces and racing rivulets of sweat. From black they mitigated into assorted browns and yellows—with rivulets. Some leaned forward as

they marched, some reared back; some wobbled both ways. Each man wore the fractional part of a uniform—a cap, a coat, a belt, or a sporadic pair of white gloves.

At the head of the procession trudged a lump of boys and men, negroes, all the same color; human beings, *en masse,* with grimy individuals flitting around the edge. Behind this formless head writhed the ash-blue serpent.

Where men and dirt and noise were thickest the drummer and fifer suffered proudly. Touching elbows with the fifer strode Ole Reliable, keeping step with the fife, then marking paces by the drum—which failed to agree.

It was a sad and happy moment; the parade had broken out unbeknownst; Ole Reliable couldn't find his gold-headed cane, but he kept his eyes on the musicians and tried to forget. He marched and choked and mopped his face. He was with the procession, but not of it, a rank outsider trailing among the rabble. Every step he took advertised the humiliating fact that he was not a member. He was not in it. He had no blue cap, no brass belt, no sword. Across his breast, like most of the others, he wore a string of badges; particularly a star-shaped affair suspended by red, white and blue ribbons.

When they wheeled into Washington Street their

stumpy little commander emerged from the smoke of battle and drew his sword; "Line up dere, goin' down Washington Street like a drove o' mules. Jim, can't you keep step no better'n dat?" This was the commander's day of glory—in private life he whitewashed fences.

Every head went up in the air; they stiffened and walked proud.

Ole Reliable stopped; the lump passed him like a mud eddy circling around a boulder. Zack's lip curled at the commander with his glittering sword. "Huh! Ole baboon—takes dat sode fer a whitewash brush. Ef I couldn't do no better'n dat I'd quit." He stood at the edge of the sidewalk; two by two, two by two they passed. Zack nodded familiarly and called them by name; those who were in it were not so punctilious. Some of them did not see him at all.

"Huh!" he grumbled, "bet d'ain't nary one of 'em got on any socks."

Rag-tag and bob-tail went by; and Ole Reliable brooded upon his hard luck. Why hadn't he joined the lodge? 'Twarn't like a parade if he wasn't on a horse or in a carriage with a red collar or a shining ax. He stumbled to the edge of the curb.

"Cor'ral," remarked a voice at his elbow; "what make you drop out?"

Zack heard with his ears, but his mind did not

register; heart and soul he followed the drum. Then some one touched him on the arm.

"Cor'ral, what for did you drop out?"

Zack turned. A slimmish, yellowish young negro with weakish eyes and glasses was blinking at him.

"What bizness is dat o' your'n, Joe Carey—I jes' got tired; it's too hot an'—an' 'sides dat I ain't in dat peerade—reg'lar."

"How come you never is j'ined—you belongs to everything else?"

"Sho do; I'm de noble Gardeen o' Abraham, de Ven'ble Warden o' Beersheba—" Zack would have gone through the alphabetical list of his entitlements if Joe Carey hadn't pointed to that star-shaped badge. "What's that?"

"Dat's when de president come through. President's pickcher got lost out an' I put dat lady in his place."

"What's that other one?"

"Come outer yeast powder can. Look here, Joe Carey, what you want wid me?"

Carey blinked toward the disappearing procession. "You oughter j'ine 'em."

Joe Carey spoke with authority, being Supreme Counsellor of several benefit associations, and government pension agent besides.

Zack moved up close. "How does you j'ine 'em? Dem niggers what's in it don't never ax nobody?"

"Of course they don't; nobody can do that except the field secretary, and," he whispered into Ole Reliable's ear, "Sh! he's at my office right now and wants to see you. Hold up, don't start off that way. Walk slow, like you wasn't goin' nowhere in particular—'bout half a block behin' me."

With this seductive word to the wise, Joe Carey sauntered along the street among a settling swarm of negroes who buzzed like bees reorganizing their hive. Ole Reliable followed cautiously, speaking to nobody, because he realized the necessity for secrecy in all matters pertaining to the lodge. They got beyond the "big-bug" stores, and came to the kind that Zack knew best—cheap negro shops, second-hand shoes, and the Hot Cat Eating House.

Joe Carey did not even pause to admire his new sign painted underneath a pair of United States flags:

J. B. Carey
Notary Public and Pension Agent

Being well-known in this neighborhood, Zack ducked through the doorway and scrambled up the stairs. It was a long narrow hall, cobwebbed and innocent of dusting brush or broom. At the far end Zack saw a swing-tailed coat disappear into Joe Carey's office. He poked his own face around the door jamb immediately thereafter, but not in time

to hear Joe Carey say, "Got him all right; he's comin'."

Joe Carey hadn't had time to sit down; the comfortable man in the easy-chair looked as if he would never have time to get up. But he did. Joe Carey presented Mr. Zack Foster to Secretary Grantley Swint.

Swint gave him the glad hand and lather-tongue. Zack took in the white vest, side-whiskers and shoes that dust couldn't touch. As for the balance, it was just a brown-skinned negro. Even in that joyous moment Zack observed that the man's eyes were gray, with plenty of white at the corners. White-eyed horses will run away—and Zack generally mistrusted a white-eyed negro. But this time he forgot. Grantley Swint had such a benevolent way of sitting with fingers locked around his white rotundity, twiddling his thumbs, and gazing out over his spectacles. Zack had once seen a bishop—and the association of ideas made him forget those tricky eyes.

A ponderous wink admitted Zack into the sanctum sanctorum of Swint's confidence. "My friend, we was speakin' 'bout you joinin' the lodge. Our members is unanimous. You walk so straight and hole yo' head so high dey say you'd look good for a commander. Course, dey couldn't say nuthin' to you until I come along."

Zack pulled his coat together, stiffened himself and adjusted his badges. "Of co'se not, of co'se not. Dat's what spiles lodge bizness, so many niggers meddlin' wid it. Gits all over town."

Grantley Swint pulled in his chin until the tiers of fat overlapped his collar, twiddled his thumbs and cleared his throat apologetically. "Mr. Carey —I hates to hurt yo' feelin's, but would you mind steppin' outside? Me an' this gent'man is 'bout to indulge in a civil conversation."

"Certainly, Mr. Sec'tary, certainly. I knows how that is—in a lodge." Joe Carey gathered up some papers and left the room. Swint did not speak again until the footsteps had nearly died away along the hall. "He's a nice young man; but they don't let young men come in our lodge. Nuthin' but 'fluence men, settled men."

It tickled Zack mightily to see the officious Joe Carey being sent out of his own office.

As he edged his chair closer, Swint remarked, "I don't like for everybody to know my bizness, does you?"

"I don't neither; niggers is got too much runnin' off o' de mouf."

"Some of 'em ain't. Comrades in dis lodge keeps their mouf shut. Now let me explain; you know we pays a quarterly benefit of twenty-four dollars, outside people call that a pension."

"Pension?" Zack exclaimed, "don't de guv'ment pay dat?"

Swint lay back in his chair and laughed until the creases in his vest got out of shape. "'Scuse me, Mr. Foster, did you believe that? Honest?"

"I—I ain't cotch on yit—what you mean?"

"Everybody believes that the guv'ment is payin' these comrades twenty-four dollars every three months."

"Ain't dey gittin' it?" Zack inquired anxiously.

"Sure they is; but the Grand Lodge pays 'em—up yonder. More'n a million white comrades in it, an' dey is mighty rich."

"Dat's all right," observed Zack; "hit don't signify whar de money comes from, pervidin' it comes rapid an' reg'lar."

The idea puzzled Ole Reliable. Swint gave it time to soak into his head. Presently the old man sighed and admitted, "Dem niggers sho did have me fooled. I saw 'em goin' to a commissioner, signin' a paper, an' gittin' money from de bank. I thought co'se de guv'ment war payin' 'em."

"Sure, you ain't no wise to blame. We don't tell a man until we done tuk him in. There now! I tole you befo' you is 'nitiated. Ain't I a plum' fool?" Swint rose and paced the floor; then he stopped and laid his hand upon Ole Reliable's shoulder. "But you got a mouf that shuts like a jail door."

Zack froze that black face until his lips looked like a straight crack across the bottom of a stove lid.

With some anxiety Swint proceeded. "Don't you want to join?"

"What is de dues?" Zack inquired.

"Dues? dues? You make me laugh. Don't you know we don't charge dues to a comrade who used to be a slave. Ex-slave law, you know."

"Oh!" Zack's face became luminous with comprehension. "Dat's de ex-slave law; I ain't never got de straight o' dat yit."

"That ex-slave provision gives our lodge its biggest advantage." Swint twiddled his thumbs and waited.

"Sure I wants to j'ine."

"Move up den an' lemme question you." Swint spread a lot of papers on the table and began in that sonorous voice which the j'iners love. "It now becomes my official duty to propound personal questions concerning the candidate. Will you true and correct answers make?"

"Troof—de whole troof—go ahead; I understan's dat?"

"How old are you?"

"Don't know jes' 'zactly. Ole Miss done tuk my age to St. Louey."

"How is that?" Swint gazed benevolently over his specs and listened while Zack explained.

"Ole Miss writ all our ages down in a big book, same as de fambly; she tuk dat wid her when she moved."

Swint selected a paper which had a long list of names—negroes who had served in the Vicksburg campaign. Many of these names he had checked in blue pencil, some with red, indicating those who were drawing pensions—living, dead, missing. The important ones he had marked with a large cross—those who had never filed a claim. Among these were several whom he believed to have enlisted in the country below Vicksburg. He turned to Zack. "Where did you live during the war?"

"Down yonder, about fo' miles 'tother side o' Gatesville."

"Who did you belong to?"

"Ole Jedge Foster."

"Good!" Swint said to himself; "the Forty-sixth picked up recruits in that neighborhood."

With this as a starting point he drew his chair closer to Zack. "You remember when the soldiers came through?"

"Sho do. Dey got in our smokehouse jes' about daylight—whole bunch o' dam-yanks—"

"What?"

"Dam-yanks—dats how de jedge allers spoke it."

"You mustn't say dam-yanks—say 'Union troops' —'our men'—'comrades.'"

"I didn't thought 'twas no harm; kinder got my tongue sot dat way."

"Do you remember when the Union troops came by—the comrades?"

"Lordy, Mister, I 'members dat good an' well, same as yistiddy. Dam-yanks tuk everything we got—didn't leave us nuthin' to eat. I was standin' in de edge o' de new groun' an' one of 'em rid out de woods on a big white hoss—'Boy,' he sez to me, 'you look hongry.' 'I is,' sezzi. 'Come 'long wid me, take keer o' dis hoss, an' I'll feed you on de fat o' de lan'.' Dat's how come he got a nigger."

Swint brightened up. "Do you remember that officer's name?"

"Naw suh; but dere wuz annudder gent'mun in dat company what dey called 'Grindstone.'"

"You mean Lieutenant Ezekiel Girdlestone?" It was Swint's business to be familiar with all these names.

"Yas suh, yas suh, dat's him, Gird'stone, tall slim white man, wid red hair, an' talked funny."

Swint took from his pocket a paper, much soiled and creased, the honorable discharge of one Cæsar Bennett, who joined Co. H, Forty-sixth U. S. C. T., near Port Gibson on April 28, 1863. He leaned forward and fastened his eye upon Ole Reliable. "Cæsar Bennett, your captain was Jeremiah Blodgett?"

"Dat's him, dat's him," Zack exclaimed; "he had long black whiskers."

"Comrade Bennett, you remember two of your officers distinctly?"

"Same as if 'twas yistiddy."

"Your captain was Jeremiah Blodgett, and your lieutenant was Ezekiel Girdlestone. Let me hear you say it."

Zack stumbled over the names until he could repeat them without a stagger, then Swint passed him on to the second lesson. "After leaving Gatesville, which way did you and your comrades march?"

"Dey marched an' dey marched until dey got pretty nigh to Raymond; den one day I heered dem skeery niggers talkin' 'bout our soldiers wuz right beyant de hill, an' dere was goin' to be a fight. I turned de cap'n's hoss loose an' lit out fer home."

"Who do you mean by *'our'* soldiers?"

"Jedge Foster's side; him an' his son wuz in de whole endurin' war. I was wid 'em 'cept dem few days."

Swint laid down his specs. "Look here, Bennett, don't say that again—say Rebels, Rebels, Rebels. Let me hear you."

After Zack learned his second lesson the teacher went on. "What was yo' name befo' the war?"

"Zack Foster, same as it is now."

"Lots of colored people changed their names."

"Swapped whenever dey got ready; sometimes when dey wuzn't ready, constable got behine 'em so hot."

"Do you know any Bennetts in that neighborhood?"

"Sho did, woods full o' Bennetts, an' dey had a whole raft o' niggers."

Swint fixed his scholar with a hypnotizing smile. "You remember how they used to call you *Bennett?* Now think?"

Zack shook his head.

"Think again. You had a nickname, didn't you?"

"Shore did."

"Didn't they used to call you Bennett? some of the boys in the neighborhood? Think real hard. You are a old hand gettin' into lodges—just a lodge name?"

Zack thought. A flicker of light played around the dark frontiers of his face. Swint watched him eagerly and suggested, "You ought to remember that much for eight dollars a month?"

Then Zack illuminated: "Shucks, ef dat's what you mean, whyn't you say so—all dem neighborhood niggers used to call me 'Bennett.' I allus passes a good 'zamination to jine a lodge."

"The people called you Bennett? Cæsar Bennett?"

"Who Bennett? Conversation ain't reached dat yit."

"Cæsar."

"No, I warn't de siezer; he is de constable what goes aroun' siezin' de niggers' mules an' craps in de fall when dey can't pay out. Dey calls *him* 'Siezer.' "

Swint got fretted. "I mean a nigger's name. They used to call you *Cæsar* Bennett?"—with a threat in the voice.

"Sho did, never called me nuthin' 'cept Cæsar Bennett."

"That was your name when you enlisted in the army."

" 'Listed? Who's he?"

"When you enlisted in the army, took up with the captain to feed his horse?"

"Yas suh, yas suh, dey always called me—what dat word you spoke?"

"*Cæsar,* Cæsar Bennett, Cæsar Bennett; don't forget."

"Yas suh, dat's it; I didn't 'zactly fergit, I jes' disremembered. Got so many names in dese lodges, I went to wool-gatherin'."

"You've got to remember—I can't get you in this lodge if you don't know your own name. Say it over and over and over." Swint studied his memoranda and listened while Zack absorbed his new

name; then he bent forward again. "Now, let's see: who were your comrades in that company?"

"Comrades, what's dat? I been hearin' you speak dat word continual."

"In our lodge we say 'comrade' instead of 'brother.' Comrades, the men who were soldiers with you, carried guns and—and so on."

"Yas suh, I 'members dem, yas suh. I 'members dey wuz men what had guns, an' had on blue clo'es."

"Do you remember Eli Mundy?"

"Ole man Eli? What used to be a blacksmith by Castle Hill? War he dar?"

"Yes, but he wasn't old then; he was young and walked spry."

Zack began to shake his head, but Swint cautioned him. "Eli was there, you are bound to remember *him;* you wasn't there yo'sef if you can't remember Eli."

Zack braced his feet and repelled the insinuation. "Sholy I remembers Eli; he had on blue clo'es an' a gun."

"What sort of guns did they have? Like this?" Swint opened an old wardrobe in the corner and produced two army muskets. "Look good at these; take them in your hand. One has got flat bands, the other's got round bands."

Ole Reliable chuckled; a flash of genuine memory

came back—the one tangible peg upon which to hang a bunch of vagaries. "Dem niggers toted two kinds o' guns. I 'members dat p'tickler, 'cause two niggers made a rookus about swappin'. Little brown-skinned nigger traded off his old gun wid a rattlesnake stock fer a new one wid flat ban's—jes' like dis."

"Good! You liked that rattlesnake stock?"

"Yas suh; dey was de bes'."

Swint repeated his old trick of leaning forward and looking Zack steadily in the eye; then he said very slowly, emphasizing each word. "Comrade Cæsar Bennett, that is how you came to trade your new gun with the flat bands for the old gun with the rattlesnake stock."

"Me?"

"Yes, you preferred the rattlesnake stock."

"Dat sho is right—dat's how come."

"Now let us try to remember the name of the man you swapped with." Swint ran through a list of dead men—men who could not arise and contradict. "Was it Abbott? Cregg? Kestler? Yes, Kestler—he'll do. Big fat yellow fellow, they called him 'Bunny Kess,' every soldier remembers him?"

Zack held a blank but receptive face as Swint described the big, jolly-natured Kestler who sang coon songs and patted juba for his comrades to

dance. With eyes half closed he listened, and presently admitted, "I spec I *jes kin* remember. Big yaller feller?"

"Yes, Cæsar."

"He come from down aroun' Natchez?"

"That's the man, I *knew* you would remember ***him.***"

"Sholy I remembers him—boun' to remember Kestler—ef I was dar."

"Good! You swapped guns with Kess?"

"Hole on, Mister, don't stampede me too brief; my 'membrance is jes' a-sneakin' back 'bout Kess an' dat gun."

"All right, Cæsar, keep on thinking, there's plenty of time."

While Zack was considering, he shook his head. "No; dat warn't Kess. I war jes' thinkin' maybe Kess war one o' dem two niggers what got shot. But dem niggers war black, an' Kess war yaller. White folks stood 'em right befront de guns an' made twelve niggers shoot 'em."

Swint sprang to his feet triumphantly. "Do you remember that? Remember the day Roddy and Binford were executed? Bully! Fine!" Swint could not restrain his excitement. "Now, Comrade Bennett, go ahead and tell what you saw."

In the history of Company H the execution of Tar Joe Roddy and Sam Binford stood out as a land-

mark by which all other events were located. Many an applicant for a pension mentioned this incident.

Zack riz, he did; this was his one indelible impression of the war, and he needed plenty room to tell it. "I disrecollect how it come up at de fust off-startin'. Tar Joe an' Sam got into a rookus, an' one of 'em shot at a white man. Maybe 'twus de cap'n. Anyhow, de white folks fotch 'em into de head cap'n's tent an tuk on mightily—had some kind o' lawsuit 'bout it. Den I heerd niggers whisperin' dat de white folks was gwine to shoot bofe of 'em nex' mornin' at eight o'clock. It war pow'ful quiet in camp dat night. Tar Joe got 'ligion right away. Us could hear 'im singin' all night long—sound mighty creepy to me. Sam never got 'ligion until nex' mornin'; but it broke out pow'ful strong. All of a sudden he busted loose singin' 'Glory, Glory, Hallelujah.'"

Zack waved his hands excitedly. Swint paced the floor, saying, "Bully! Bully! Go on."

"Den nex' mornin' de white folks 'tailed out twelve men an' had de grave already dug. Dem twelve niggers wuz whiter'n a blacksnake's belly. Heap of 'em drapped de guns, an' couldn't hardly pick 'em up. Tar Joe an' Sam had deir han's tied behine 'em. Lord Gawd! Mister, when dem guns went off dey jes' crumpled up an' rolled in dem graves same as dough men. *Dat's* when I went

home; I forestated you wrong de fust time. 'Cause when I seen *dat,* I turned cap'n's hoss loose an' lit out through de woods."

"Where did that happen?"

"'Twarn't far from Pote Gibson. Didn't take me no more'n 'bout a day to git home; but I went home pretty brief."

"Bully! Bully! You've got a fine memory."

"Yas suh; I got a 'membrance like de cunnel's 'count-book."

"Now then, comrade, let me see if I heard this straight. You went by the name of Cæsar Bennett? Enlisted near Gatesville? Company H, Forty-sixth U. S. C. T.? Captain Jeremiah Blodgett? Lieutenant Ezekiel Girdlestone?—the one that they called 'Grindstone?'—swapped guns with Kestler, yours was new and had flat bands, his was old and had a rattlesnake stock? You remember seeing Roddy and Binford when they were shot—"

Ole Reliable nodded his head and verified each item through the inventory. Swint expressed his proud satisfaction. "You have passed your trial test for the first degree; next time you'll remember a lot more."

"Dat ain't nigh all I kin remember."

"Come back to-morrow night at eight o'clock and we'll begin the second degree; one test for each degree, you understand?"

"Yas, dat's right. Degree got to stan' on its own bottom; dat sho is right."

Swint led him to the door and walked along the hall with his hand on Ole Reliable's shoulder. "Comrade Cæsar Bennett, I reckin 'tain't no use to keep tellin' you not to talk, 'specially to the other comrades."

"Shet mouf ketches no flies," Zack remarked sententiously.

He reached the stair and began feeling around with his foot for the top step, his mind being fully occupied. "Hole on, Mister, when does I start to gittin' dem benefits?"

"Just as soon as the papers come back from headquarters."

"Dat's all right; I ain't sot my min' on waitin'." Zack passed out on the street clamping his teeth and glaring suspiciously, for fear those negroes might be trying to read his mind.

Swint being left alone, pored over his memoranda, which gave a complete history of Company H. "We must get old man Eli Mundy and some other comrade to identify Ole Reliable as Cæsar Bennett." Swint jotted down several other details which would complete his chain of proof.

Joe Carey came pacing down the hall and entered nervously. "Well, what luck?"

"Fine; best in the world."

"Can you prove him up?"

"Slick as a whistle; he is Cæsar Bennett to a gnat's heel."

"I thought you were going to claim for Ed McNair?"

Swint shook his head. "He comes nearer tallyin' with Cæsar Bennett. I've got Bennett's discharge, and that goes a long way. Bennett only served about four months; didn't have time to get acquainted with other negroes and they won't be apt to dispute him. Your old man won't have anything to remember, except the country between Grand Gulf and Vicksburg, and he knows that like a book."

"I thought he'd be easy," Joe Carey agreed. "By the way, what became of Cæsar Bennett?"

"Got killed in Fort Scott; went by the name of Charlie Jones. That's where I got his discharge papers; application pending for near two thousand dollars back pay. The pension for Zack—two thousand for us. How is that?"

Joe Carey whistled. "We'll put *that* through in a hurry. Does Ole Reliable remember things?"

Swint laughed. "Best claimant you ever saw. Remembers anything—all you got to do is to blindbridle him, back up against it and coax him slow—two or three times. And don't give him too big a bite. I could make him remember being King of Jerusalem or King of Spades—either one."

"That's good; after you hammer a thing into his head he'll stick to it. How about the other members of that company?"

"It never was a full company—only thirty-four men—eleven known to be alive. Two of 'em live right here—Eli Mundy and Sandy Spriggs."

"I'll work them like creamery butter," remarked Carey; "jes' watch me straighten 'em out—two or three drinks, talk about war times, what Cæsar done, what Cæsar said, mix Zack into it gradual, let him come in and tell war stories—they'll identify him all right. That's easy."

It proved to be easy. But a man must have a long memory who tells a long lie. The pair neglected to coach their dummy on two propositions—the special examiner who comes when the application is for a pension, with *back pay*. And—another big snag—Cæsar Bennett was wanted at Raymond, Mississippi, for killing a man. That's why he ran away and changed his name.

Zack galloped out of preparatory school with first honors. The post-graduate class foregathered with Eli Mundy and Sandy Spriggs at the Hot Cat Eating House. There they jogged the lagging flank of memory with slices of catfish and divers cans of beer—all at the expense of the benevolent Grantley Swint.

As Swint was supplying the money, he felt a nat-

ural desire to hear the recitations. This purpose he kept dark because he didn't want them to put up their infant prodigy to speak a piece for the trustees. He wanted to see the class in its common, every-day grind. So Swint slipped in the back door and tiptoed forward. He might have come with a regiment of cavalry and they wouldn't have heard him. Ole Reliable had the floor, pounding on the table and gesticulating. Sandy tugged at his coat sleeve and disputed. "'Twarn't no sech thing—dat was Wes Fennimo!"

Eli jerked Sandy's hand away. "Let Comrade Bennett tell it like 'twas."

Comrade Bennett orated. "As I forestated, about a milyun rebels chased Corp'ral Austin into Huckleberry Creek, an' he drapped his gun—"

Sandy tried to howl him down. "'Twarn't dat-a-way at all; dat was Wesley Fennimo; an' I kin prove it."

"Shet up Sandy," admonished old man Eli. "I don't believe you was dar."

"I *wuz* dar; warn't I, Cæsar? Didn't you see me climbin' de fence whilst you wuz lyin' down behin' dat log poppin' at de rebels? Dat's when you got yo' cap shot off—ain't dat so, Cæsar?"

Ole Reliable nodded grudgingly. "Yas, you *wuz* dar; I owns up to *dat* much."

"Now, Sandy, you kin res' quiet an' let Cæsar

talk," suggested Eli. "Cæsar knows a heap mo' 'bout dat war dan what de cap'n do."

"Now don't that beat the devil," Swint said to himself, and smilingly vanished through the back door. The next day Joe Carey notified Ole Reliable to bring his witnesses and make out the papers.

Three abreast, the comrades marched, with Cæsar Bennett in the middle. Behind them came Eli's son-in-law, who was a straggler, but book-larnt; they fotch him along to do the writin'.

At the foot of Joe Carey's steps Eli Mundy gave the order. "'Bout face, comrades—by de lef' flank —march," and they all went stumbling up together. Eli and Sandy wore those battered blue caps and U. S. belts—their exclusive job while drawing a pension.

Joe Carey sat in his office alone, unconcerned and with nothing to say. He looked over the scribe's shoulders and saw that the blanks were properly filled out, swore the witnesses, and affixed his seal.

"That's all, Bennett; it goes off in the mail to-night."

It did go in the mail that night, to the Pension Bureau at Washington, but not until Swint had approved it in every detail. "That application is O. K.; you ain't touched it, an' I ain't touched it. In case o' accidents, they can't 'spicion us."

Colonel Spottiswoode was summer-napping in his hammock—a function rarely omitted and never disturbed. He wore a pair of loose linen trousers; his shirt flared open at the neck. A palmetto fan lay on the floor beside him. The telephone rang, and rang again peremptorily before the fat cook answered. Then she waddled out as fast as her grand-piano legs would carry her. "Cunnel! wake up, Cunnel! dey got Zack in jail."

The figure in the hammock never stirred. Aunt Abby shook the rope excitedly and added, "Zack done kilt a man."

"What? Who?" The colonel sat up blinking.

"Dunno who; sheriff say come thar right quick."

When Colonel Spottiswoode mounted the jail steps he was followed by a quiet-looking gentleman who stopped and stood behind him in the hallway. The sheriff and another stranger came out of the office. "Colonel Spottiswoode, this is Mr. Vaughn, sheriff of Hinds County. He came to get Ole Reliable."

Sheriff Vaughn laughed. "Wild-goose chase, Colonel. A negro named Cæsar Bennett killed another negro near Raymond about ten years ago. Last week a Vicksburg Grand Army negro came out to Raymond and mentioned that Cæsar Bennett had made application for a pension. So I came over

here to pick him up. But he is not the man. Our Cæsar had two toes cut off in a saw-mill accident just before he ran away."

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," the quiet stranger stepped forward and presented the sheriff his card.

MR. CARSTON KENNEDY
SPECIAL EXAMINER U. S. PENSION BUREAU

"What can I do for you, Mr. Kennedy," the sheriff inquired.

"If that isn't *your* man, he must be mine; his real name is Zack Foster, and he is personating Cæsar Bennett in order to get a pension."

"Listen to that, Mr. Vaughn," the colonel exploded. "How's that for a nigger? Got any like him in Hinds? That old fool is as innocent as a baby, yet he'll blunder into pension frauds and murder just for fun."

Mr. Kennedy glanced around. "Do you know him, sir?"

"Know him? I can read Zack's mind backward."

"Would you object to talking with him in my presence?"

"That depends. To get him out of trouble? Yes. If not, I'm agin the government."

Kennedy smiled. "I think you might help him.

I've been investigating this case for two weeks, and believe he is a mere tool."

"Where are you from, sir?" asked the colonel.

"Virginia, sir."

"Good; you'll recognize Ole Reliable. There are thousands like him in Virginia."

The four white men conferred together for half an hour in the jail office, and Mr. Kennedy gave a surprisingly accurate statement of the facts. Then he turned to the sheriff. "Now, sir, we are ready for the claimant. Mr. Vaughn, will you kindly do the talking, and let me sit here in the corner. Give him a good scare."

Nobody, not even a Virginian, would have recognized Ole Reliable in the shambling and shrunken figure that came clanking into the room. Colonel Spottiswoode sat by the window looking out. "Lord Gawd, Cunnel! I sho' is proud to see you."

The colonel gloomily averted his face. "Jig's up, Zack. This gentleman has come for you."

The old negro stared from one to the other. "Which gent'man? Gawd's sake, Cunnel, don't let 'em take me."

Vaughn began brutally. "Cæsar Bennett, you know what I want you for and you better confess. Tell the truth and maybe they won't hang you. Why did you kill Bud Rogers?"

Ole Reliable cast one terrified glance at the

colonel, who was gazing through the window. "Kill —who? Befo' Gawd, Mister, I ain't never heerd o' dat man."

"Both of you were working at McKay's saw-mill in Raymond?"

"I ain't neber been to Raymond."

"But you are Cæsar Bennett?"

A ghastly smile flickered around Ole Reliable's lips. "Mister, ain't you humbuggin' wid me? I jes' been goin' by dat name here lately."

"So you *are* Cæsar Bennett?"

"Dat's a joke, Mister, jes' a bumfuzzle amongst de lodge comrades." As nobody responded to his merriment, the smile passed with a sickly quiver, and Vaughn demanded: "What lodge?"

"Gran' Army Republicans. I war fixin' to jine an' dey jes call me Cæsar Bennett, 'cordin' to de rule. Been jokin' me continual—Cæsar dis an' Cæsar dat. 'Twarn't nuthin' 'cept a passel o' dribble-drabble, an' I jes' humored 'em."

"So it was a joke?"

"Yas suh, boss. Jokin' is all right 'mongst niggers, but white gent'mans, dey pranks too rough. Slapped me in jail wid all dese chains. Honest, boss, ain't dat kinder *over-jokin'* wid a nigger?"

"Didn't they use to joke you pretty rough in the army?"

Zack smiled his sickly smile again, then let it

freeze. "Mister, please suh, don't skylark wid me —dese here things hurts my laigs. I warn't never in dat army 'cept to feed cap'n's hoss. An' I p'intedly quit dat."

At a nod from Mr. Kennedy, the sheriff unlocked the handcuffs, and Kennedy motioned him to a chair. "Sit here, old man, I want to talk with you."

Colonel Spottiswoode turned from the window. "Now, Zack, you tell this gentleman the truth—everything you know."

"Yas suh, Cunnel; I sho' will."

For an hour Kennedy sweated Ole Reliable through the third degree; then he smiled at Colonel Spottiswoode. "That's the way I thought it was. Swint and Carey got him into this and skipped out, but they can't get far. Can I find this man when I want him for a witness?"

"Certainly, sir, I'll make a bond for him if you like," nodded the colonel.

Then Kennedy signified that he was done.

"Zack," said the colonel sharply, "don't you want to join a new lodge?"

"No suh!"

"Yes, you do; I'm going to *make* you join. Catch that train and go up to the plantation. Mr. Billy Wade has elected you Most Noble Hustler of the Hoe Hands. In the fall you'll join the Grand United Army of Cotton Pickers."

Zack's face broadened into a grin, a real, genuine grin. "Ef dat's all right wid you, Cunnel, it sho' suits me."

"Hurry on home and pack up."

Ole Reliable started out of the door, then stopped and hung his head. "Cunnel, please, suh, don't make me go home—Seliny, she's dar. Lemme jes' walk up to de National Cem'terry an' git on de train."

Under the colonel's inquiring glance Zack explained further. "Dem triflin' niggers down-town, dey'll buzz me scan'lous 'bout j'inin' de lodge an' gittin' put in jail."

Colonel gave him the railroad fare and Zack set out. "Good-by, Cunnel, I'm gwine to do like dat wicked flea—he nacherly gits up an' gits when no man pursueth."

"Yes," remarked the colonel to himself, "and he won't stay on that plantation two weeks."

CHAPTER V

THE BEAST OF BUCKSHOT RIDGE

COLONEL Beverly Spottiswoode sailed out of the Vicksburg National Bank like a full-rigged vessel before a stiff breeze. "Can't stop, John; can't stop; got to buy a lot of things and catch a train."

The president showed a bundle of papers. "It won't take half an hour."

Colonel shook his head. "Can't spare half a minute. It would be a great pleasure to examine those deeds, but I'm going bear-hunting especially to get the Beast of Buckshot Ridge. That's business, and business before pleasure, as you always say. Just sign my name."

The president peered after him through the bars of his cage. "I wish I had sense enough to enjoy life." But he hadn't. He put on his spectacles and returned to the treadmill of his desk.

Massive and generously built, the colonel blew on, steered among the smaller craft, then hove to at the edge of the sidewalk and stood facing the breeze. His suit of flowing linen flapped about his legs; he was always the first to bud into summer linens, and

it took a white frost in the autumn to freeze him out. He had the fresh complexion of a child, and his heartiness suggested the sea—which he saw every time the Sherwood Plantation was overflowed.

At the corner he stopped long enough to consult a memorandum—guns, ammunition, provisions—then sailed on, waving aside various friends who wanted to chat.

Doctor Chase was standing at the curb, holding his horse with one hand; with the other he caught the colonel's arm. "Wait a minute, Bev, I've got a message for you."

"Out with it; I'm in a hurry." The family physician tiptoed to reach the colonel's ear. "Sh! I've just come from the jail. There's a friend of yours up there—in trouble—says for you to come get him out right away."

"Who is it?"

"Sh! Doesn't want his name mentioned—might get in the newspapers." The doctor stepped into his buggy and was gone.

Colonel Spottiswoode looked at his watch and thought of half a dozen friends who might come to town and trip by the wayside. "Hi, there, hackman!"—one of those swaybacked, rollicking hacks—and he whispered to the driver: "Jail, quick."

With such nonchalance as his haste permitted Colonel Spottiswoode strolled into the jail; undue

anxiety might cast suspicion upon a friend, when it would later become his duty to lie like a gentleman. He beckoned the jailer into a private office. "Jerry, who is it?"

"Who is what, Colonel?"

"The gentleman who sent for me."

Jerry shook his head.

"Is there no gentleman up here who—who—"

"No, just the same old bunch of bums."

"Might I look in?"

"Sure." Jerry opened a door into the hall where the police pickups lounged. Every prisoner turned his eyes to see the new arrival. From the far end a scrawny-built negro man came shuffling toward them, jerking off his cap.

"Dar's him—dar's de Cun'l—Doctor Chase 'lowed he war gwine to let you know. It's me, Cun'l! Zack! Ole Reliable."

The astonished colonel backed into the office; Ole Reliable strutted after—then dropped his cap on the floor. "Mister Jerry, I tole you de Cun'l warn't gwine to res' till he got me out."

The colonel glared, got red and swelled—then burst into primary and elemental cussin'; he exhausted every rudiment of invective, soared through the higher branches and topped off with frills peculiar to himself.

Ole Reliable listened solemnly as to a benediction;

now and again he nodded at some novelty in the way of vigorous expression.

The colonel's breath gave out and he dropped into a chair. Ole Reliable lifted his head triumphantly and smiled at the jailer. "Dar now, Mister Jerry, ain't dat jes' what I tole you—de Cun'l sho' is de mos' plain-spoken white gent'man in dis town. He don't say nuthin' behine nobody's back."

The colonel thumped the floor with his cane and turned helplessly. "Jerry, what can you do with a nigger like that? Get out of this jail, climb on that hack and wait."

Zack got and climbed. The jailer cautioned him: "Zack, you better keep out of the way of those negroes; we'll be juggin' some of them for killing you."

"Lordy, Mr. Jerry, dem niggers ain't gwine to see me no mo'—I'm done wid 'em."

Colonel Spottiswoode rose with a jerk and started out the door, when Jerry stopped him.

"One minute, Colonel; what about the charges against Zack?"

"What charges? He's guilty; put him on the chain gang—for ten years."

"It's nothing serious—just a drop too much and a rough bit of argument—"

"Tell the judge to stick it to him—give him the limit and let me know what it is."

Billy Wade cherished no illusions about his position on Sherwood Plantation. He had long been the manager for Colonel Spottiswoode, who visited his property once a month in summer, or brought his friends for protracted bear-hunts during the fall and winter. Billy had always been supreme until, by the colonel's permission, his widowed sister came to keep house for him. After that he perched on a lower limb, she taking her rightful place as supervisor of human affairs.

Mrs. Bella Wynston—spelled with a *y*—arrived on a certain day at noon. At twelve-one P. M. she began readjusting that portion of the United States.

Nobody knew whether Providence or the law had fixed her status as a widow. As to other matters, Mrs. Wynston relieved Providence of all responsibility and regulated social functions "as we do in New York."

Billy Wade sneaked to the front gallery for a quiet smoke. He planted a foot against the banister and lighted his pipe.

Mrs. Wynston emerged. Her ankles were undeniably pretty and the skirt was none too long.

"William, you had your foot on those banisters, and they have just been scrubbed. Please not to drop ashes on the floor."

Billy held his tongue—that being his irritating specialty. He started down the steps to smoke in

the yard. Mrs. Bella Wynston opened her watch and snapped it positively. "Two o'clock. Be so kind as to order your horse and mine for half-past three precisely."

"Where are we going."

"We shall ride to camp. Colonel Spottiswoode might forget that to-morrow will be Sunday and we have the bishop for dinner."

"Hadn't you better send a negro? I would not go myself."

"Not a word, William; I know exactly what you are going to say. These spiteful women have been saying it. I wouldn't marry Beverly Spottiswoode if every hair in his head were strung with diamonds."

"But I can't very well leave the store—this is Saturday."

"Oh, very well; I shall take Old Perk and ride seven miles through the swamp with a negro."

"There is no use in your going. The colonel said he would come home to-night."

"William, the colonel does not know one day from another when he goes hunting. He'll forget all about it. What would the neighbors say: 'Colonel Spottiswoode builds that beautiful chapel, invites the bishop here to consecrate it, and stays out in the woods hunting bear.' I should be a laughing-stock. What would the bishop think?"

Billy had it on the tip of his tongue to mention a certain irreverent amount that he didn't care—Billy held many things on the tip of his tongue that he never let fall off.

"All right; three-thirty goes."

Four fresh bearskins hung on the rack in front of Colonel Spottiswoode's tent. The cook and camp-boy lay asleep, likewise the dogs, such as were not licking their wounds. Ole Reliable, abjectly and utterly wretched, sat on the ground with his shoes off, rubbing his feet with liniment. He listened half-heartedly to a discussion that had been going on for the entire afternoon. In a flannel shirt and corduroy breeches, with five days' growth of beard on his face, Colonel Spottiswoode talked earnestly with Dan and Al. Both of those rough old hunters shook their heads. The colonel was standing, looking down at the others.

"Be reasonable, boys; we came here to get the Beast, and we haven't got him. That bear has killed more dogs than we can count. Think of old Music and Kate; and Rumpus, the best hound that ever made a track through this swamp. We've sworn to nail his hide on the barn door. He's dodged us three times this week, but we know where he is and can get him to-morrow."

Dan and Al were veteran woodsmen. Hunting

was their trade, but not for money. They hadn't a cent between them and didn't need it—they loved the game.

Al crouched on his haunches from long habit. Dan chawed and shook his head. "Kunnel, 'tain't no sense stayin' no longer. Our dogs is wore out and we is wore out. Them dogs is cut an' crippled up so they couldn't kill a rabbit. Eight of 'em is dead or missin'. I'm goin' home."

Al nodded assent. "My hoss is lame. You can't hunt up all the huntin' at one time. You got to leave some fer next year."

The colonel laid a hand on each of their shoulders. "Boys, we've been friends all our lives, and you know I have never denied you anything. If you want a meal or a home or a dog or a dollar that belongs to me you can always get it. Give me one more chance—that's all I ask."

The Spottiswoodes were not people to recount past favors; Dan and Al were not men to forget. Colonel Bev had a goodly balance to his credit, and these woodsmen knew every item. They would not repay, but they would remember. He pleaded for just one more day until Dan began to weaken. "If Al stays I'll stay."

"Good!" exclaimed the colonel. "I knew you fellows wouldn't go back on me."

Two weary dogs lifted their heads and began to

bark; Ole Reliable held his liniment bottle and gazed. Dan's long, knotty finger pointed through the woods. "What is it?" asked the colonel, and Dan answered sententiously: "Lady folks."

The colonel turned and vanished into his tent. He washed his face with a wet towel, knocked the dirt from his clothes, put on a coat and stood uncovered to welcome Mrs. Wynston. "My dear lady, this is a great honor. Pardon our camp, but we were not expecting ladies. This is Mr. Dan Jamison and Mr. Al French." The woodsmen rose awkwardly and bowed in silence. Mrs. Wynston was a person who never knew them.

The colonel—pink of courtesy—lifted his arms to assist her from the saddle. She tapped him on the shoulder with her whip and smiled. "No, Colonel, I shall not dismount. William and I came out for the pleasure of riding home with you. You've been gone a whole week," and she flashed her black eyes at him.

Al and Dan tried not to grin as they withdrew to the woods—their ever-present asylum in time of trouble.

Mrs. Wynston did not ask the colonel if he were going. She superintended his departure—and with a pretty tact ordered Zack to saddle his horse. Zack hustled with his crippled feet. The colonel glanced toward his friends and moved in their direction;

she kept her place beside him so adroitly it seemed that he was leading her.

Mrs. Wynston chatted gaily, leaning forward to lay her gloved fingers upon the colonel's shoulder. Ole Reliable hobbled up with the horse and hung the bridle over the colonel's arm.

Mrs. Wynston looked at the negro a moment and demanded: "Old man, what did you say your name is?"

"Zack, ma'am; but everybody, white and black, calls me 'Ole Reliable.' I never—"

"Yes, you recited all that when you first came. Come right home with us; you are to help serve the bishop's dinner to-morrow."

"Yas'm, yas'm." Zack limped off for his mule.

Mrs. Wynston smiled brilliantly upon her escort and lowered her black lashes: "Colonel, we are ready to go home."

"Pardon me—one moment." The colonel escaped for an instant and whispered to Dan: "I'll be back at daylight Monday morning. You boys get a good rest to-night and to-morrow. Doctor the dogs. Tie up Bugler, so that Shag won't follow me home."

Billy sat his horse, thrashing leaves from a sassafras bush, while his sister personally conducted the conversation.

The colonel and Mrs. Wynston—spelled with a *y* —rode homeward together through the slanting sun-

shine of melancholy day. Billy tagged behind with Ole Reliable. They cantered into the front gate and Mrs. Wynston made a gesture with her whip. "Doesn't the yard look neat?"

The colonel glanced around him; everything regular, formal, clean-swept—not a place where he would dare throw down a saddle or hitch a horse. He bowed profoundly. "Yes, madam, you have brought Heaven's first law to Sherwood."

She threw her weight unreservedly upon him as he lifted her to the porch and stood, hat in hand. "You are so strong," she smiled.

Suddenly she stamped her foot at a dog that came slinking through the yard. "Get out of here!"

The colonel turned. "Why, it's Shag!" Shag was Bugler's partner, one of his favorites, a rough-haired nondescript with a reputation.

"Oh, colonel, I didn't know it was your dog. Come here, puppy, pretty puppy."

Shag eyed her dubiously and crept to the colonel's feet. The colonel stooped down and patted him, with a reproach. "What are you doing here, old fellow? You had no business leaving Bugler. Come." Colonel Spottiswoode led his horse around the house and the dog followed. Mrs. Wynston shook her head at Ole Reliable, who was entering the front gate. He turned back and went through the pasture-lot to the stable.

On a bench in the back yard, against the sunny side of his cabin, sat a negro with white whiskers—like seed cotton full of cockle-burs. His wrinkled black face broadened into a smile as his old master and friend spoke to him. "Good evening, Uncle Perk; how do you feel?"

"Po'ly, Marse Bev; did you git de Beast?"

"No; we jumped him three times, but he dodged us."

"Dat ain't no bear—dat's de debil. Spec I got to work a hoodoo on 'im."

"Take a good look at Shag; something must be wrong. He left old Bugler and followed me home."

"Huh! Tain't no tellin' what's gwine to take place when you's chasin' de Beast. Shag, what you mean by doin' dat-a-way? You know yo' place is whar Bugler is." Shag crouched and wagged his tail while Perk felt him over, head and hip, jaws and paws. "Nuthin' ails dis dog—he's jes' burnt out."

"How are the new dogs?"

"Dey acks purty good in de yard; whyn't you try 'em in de woods?"

"Have them all ready—I am going back at daylight Monday morning to get the Beast."

"Now, dat's de way fer de Spottiswoode boys to talk." Old Perk's eyes glistened.

The white man turned reluctantly from the negro, braced himself and entered the house.

When Colonel Spottiswoode opened his eyes on Sunday morning he saw Ole Reliable putting the buttons in his shirt. A black suit, aggressively new and exactly creased, hung on the back of a chair. "Zack, what are you grinning at?"

The negro jumped. "Nuthin' suh, nuthin'."

"Yes, you were grinning."

"I was jes' a-wonderin' how you gwine to look in dem preacher clo'es."

The colonel made a queer contortion of the lips. He had been wondering, too.

Zack went to the kitchen and came back with a mug full of hot water, when the colonel sat up in bed and inquired, "Any news from out yonder?" nodding toward the woods.

"No suh."

"I was afraid they might break camp when I left."

"No, suh—better git up an' dress—missus 'pears to be powerful sot 'bout havin' breakfust right on de minit."

"Is the bishop awake?"

"Yas suh, him an' dat youngest preacher gentmun is walkin' up an' down de gallery."

The colonel yawned and stretched, with one foot

hanging from the bed. The faint voice of a dog floated in at the window. "What's that?"

"Nuthin' suh; jes' a dog barkin' in de woods. Missus say fer me to shave you right away."

Zack commenced applying the lather whether or no, and hurried as Mrs. Wynston rapped on the door.

"Colonel," she called in a voice obviously amiable, but decisive, "breakfast in five minutes."

"Thank you, I'm ready."

Colonel had the rush of his life, but he made it in seven minutes, thanks to Zack. Every preparation for his arrayal had been systematic, like those for the erection of a circus tent. Zack gazed with pride upon the stately figure in the swing-tail coat which stood at the dining-room door gracefully inviting the bishop and other clergy to partake of his hospitality.

At the head of the table sat Mrs. Wynston—spelled with a *y*—a grand lady with impressive accent.

When Zack returned to the kitchen for a second cargo of cakes he confided to Aunt Sallie: "Ef dat don't beat de Jews; you oughter hear de Cun'l settin' up dar sayin' 'Bishop dis an' Bishop dat,' 'sputin' an' argufyin' 'bout de Scriptures jes' as nacheral as a duck gwine barefooted."

The deep-mouthed bay of a hound sounded like a trumpet in the woods, so loud and insistent that it

demanded recognition. The new dogs in the stable-lot began to bark. Zack halted and listened. Again the hound bayed; the new dogs raised another clamor.

Zack started toward the dining-room with the cakes and met the colonel on the back gallery.

"What are those dogs barking at?"

Zack nodded toward the canebrake, from which there rose a long, keen howl—the cry of a dog, a trained dog, a cry that meant something.

"That's Bugler!" exclaimed the colonel, running out to Uncle Perk. "Perk, isn't that Bugler?"

"Yas suh, dat sho' is Bugler; I heerd 'im jes' now."

Another dog immediately opened up. "Shag! By the gods o' war! How did Shag get out?"

"He jes' nacherly clumb de fence fust time he heerd Bugler."

The colonel breathed hard. "They've jumped the Beast," he suggested, half hoping it wasn't true.

Old Perk nodded with certainty. "Dat's de Beast, sho' as hell's a mousetrap; dem dogs don't bark like dat at nothin' else, eber since de Beast ripped ole Bugler—"

Zack dawdled on the threshold with the plate of cakes in his hand, one ear reaching out toward the dining-room, the other catching whatever came from the woods.

Colonel Spottiswoode stood erect and alert, eyes shining, heart beating, hands tight clenched and lips apart.

"Zack! Zack!" Mrs. Wynston called from the dining-room in a voice of honey-plated command. Without turning his head, scarcely opening his lips, the colonel said: "Go back to the table; tell Mrs. Wynston I've gone to quiet the dogs."

"Yas suh."

Zack paused for an instant in the back door, but it was long enough for him to see the colonel striding into the stable-lot, where his new dogs were butting their heads against the fence, trying to scramble through, and barking in a frenzy.

The long, strong cry of a single dog uprose from the canebrake like a lone rocket, trembled in the blue dome of heaven, then burst into a multitudinous baying of many voices. The colonel let out a mighty yell.

After Zack had passed the cakes he crept to the back door and witnessed a calamity. The canebrake seemed alive with clamorous yelpings—the shrill, the keen, the profundo and the treble—all sorts and conditions of dogs, kin only in their vociferous excitement.

Colonel Spottiswoode had tossed a saddle on the long-legged bay, and was racing across the cotton-field with four fresh hounds.

Uncle Perk tottered to the fence and sat on the top plank, waving his hat and shouting.

"Dar, now!" Zack exclaimed, then wheeled and stood face to face with Mrs. Wynston.

"What is all that noise? And where is the colonel?"

Zack floundered and said something at random. "Warn't dat him jes' went in his room? Lemme see." He made a movement to open the door. So great was his anxiety to divert her attention that Zack glanced backward toward the woods, and Mrs. Wynston's eyes followed his. Far across the fields she saw the fluttering coat-tails of a hatless horseman, with the yelping hounds behind him. Mrs. Wynston stood aghast; the red color flooded her cheeks and her teeth gleamed. "You, Zack—you—" But Zack had faded away into the dining-room, seeking sanctuary with the bishop and other clergy. His eyes showed white when Mrs. Wynston entered. She bit her lip and Zack knew he'd catch it presently. "Huh!" he thought, "de Cunnel done gone on; I ain't gwine to stay here!"

At the edge of the woods the colonel paused—mentally; his horse never faltered. He looked back to the house—mentally. "Might as well be killed for an old sheep as a lamb." So he filled his lungs with the green-woods air, leaned forward in his saddle and shouted at the dogs.

The colonel had a good horse between his legs. With loose rein he dashed on in the direction of Shag and Bugler, passing through a straggling rabble of dogs from the camp—big dogs, little dogs, lame dogs, bulldogs, curs, pointers and hounds. His four recruits distanced the others, tired as they were from a week of fighting. There were Spot and Dick and Tug; they belonged to Al French. Lil and Rally and Monk—they were Dan's. The colonel recognized each animal that he overtook. He rose in his stirrups and cheered as Dan's brindle hound cleared the fence like a bird. "Hooray! Rowdy! After the Beast!"

He patted the neck of his splendid bay; the horse took the fence like the undulation of a mighty wave, leaped lightly as a foaming crest, and scurried like surf through the brush beyond. It was a straightaway chase and moved in a whirlwind, a sweeping circle that eventually came back within two miles of where they started. The lone horseman rode as only a bear-hunter in the swamp can ride—swaying in his saddle, ducking the low limbs, dodging the trees and, selecting by instinct the thinnest place, crashing through undergrowth and canebrake by sheer weight of horse and man. The main thing was to go—and go he did. Many times he was able to stop and rest his horse, because he knew that the chase would turn and come back. Once in a while

he raised the rally-cry of a huntsman calling to his pack.

Falling in behind the hounds again he crossed a clearing and paused, imperceptibly, to take his bearings. The chase now led directly toward the public road, which for two miles hugged the river bank. This road also led from the Sherwood house to the chapel—the road along which the bishop and Mrs. Wynston were coming to the chapel. But Colonel didn't think of that. He could hear the Beast—he thought only of the Beast, and the Beast was making for water. "I'll cut him off at the river." Again he touched Bayfellow on the neck. The gaunt horse opened and shut like a jackknife, devouring distance. But in brush and cane the Beast was swifter. The colonel galloped through the last fringe of woods, crossed the public road and halted his horse like a cow-boy, just in time to see the Beast go plunging into the river a hundred yards up-stream.

Shag, the gallant hound, not twenty leaps behind him, did not flicker. The Beast swam magnificently, widening the space between himself and the dog. Then Bugler darted out of the bushes like a ferret. In a twinkling the river had filled with buffeting dogs. The Beast led them all like a black comet with a spreading tail of hounds behind him.

The first dozen or so—particularly Shag, Bugler, Rowdy and the four recruits, bade fair to get across

in safety; they seemed fresh and swam strongly. But others came, continued to come, and kept on coming—excited, hysterical, unreasoning animals. Crippled hounds that could scarcely stand tottered to the water's edge and tumbled in. They struggled feebly, but the current bore them away. Some got out again, some disappeared.

The colonel threw himself from his horse, ran up and down the muddy bank, shouting, kicking, beating them back, dragging them from the water.

Weather-beaten Dan emerged from the bushes and appeared on top of the bank. He crossed his legs wearily over his mule and sat sidewise, contemplating the catastrophe. "'Tain't no use, Kunnel—let 'em go; when them dogs gits the high-strikes you can't do nuthin' with 'em."

"That's the Beast, Dan—the *Beast,* I tell you," yelled the colonel.

"Yas, I know; hope yo' dogs'll git 'im—mine is wore out."

The colonel dropped on a log and felt in his pocket for a handkerchief. "Jee-rusalem! How I hate to see that bear get away." He pulled out a napkin which he had brought from the breakfast-table, and began to wipe his face. Cockle-burs clung to his breeches; a brier had caught his coat-tail and torn a jagged triangle. He and Dan sat without a word and watched the swimming race. Presently Al

French came out of the woods and joined the pair in silence.

Across the river hundreds of deadened trees lifted their tall white trunks from out a wilderness of briers. The Beast swam like an otter and gained easily on the dogs. He could have got away without the slightest trouble. But he didn't. He ambled up the farther bank with plenty of time to spare, yet, as if in pure bravado, he took to one of the smallest trees in plain sight. From the first dead fork he gazed calmly down upon the dogs.

Al French wriggled on his horse, too tired to do anything but protest. "Look-a yonder, Kunnel, did you ever see the beat o' that fer impudence?"

The colonel shook his head. "Where did you get him up?"

"We broke camp after you-all dug out; we was ridin' 'long todes home, an' Bugler jumped the Beast right there by the nigh end o' Lost Lake. Bugler is allers been hell-bent on gittin' that special bear."

"Was it near that burnt cypress? I knew it! Didn't I tell you that's where we would find him? We lost him in that cane last November—the twelfth."

Al nodded. "Yas, Kunnel, you prophesied correct." They took another long look at the bear, reposing comfortably in his fork, with Shag and Bugler leaping up from the mob below.

Dan consumed several minutes in cutting a chunk of tobacco and peeling off the outer leaf. "Kunnel," he drawled, "how'd you git away? I thought you warn't allowed to come out agin till Monday?"

"Well, I didn't intend to; the bishop's at my house. But the dogs passed while we were eating breakfast." He flushed guiltily and stuffed the napkin in his pocket. "Those new dogs made such a racket in the yard I thought I'd step out and call 'em off."

"Thar they is—do yer callin'." Dan included the universe in one all-embracing gesture and passed his horn to the colonel. The colonel blew and shouted and called, but only added to the hubbub across the river. Then he handed back his horn. "No use, Dan —I can't blow off Shag and Bugler, not after they see the bear. Suppose you try to call Rowdy."

"It's jes' wastin' good breath, and I might need it some day. Rowdy ain't comin'."

The three white men sat there, helpless as frogs watching a balloon.

The cook and the negro camp-boy dragged themselves out of the woods, tumbled limply off the mules and lay in a huddle on the grass.

Ole Reliable came limping along the road on foot. He had slipped over the back fence when Mrs. Wynston sent him to hurry the bishop's carriage. He hit the big road and followed it, going most anywhere. When he heard the horn he peartened up

his gait and joined the colonel without a word. Two or three times he tried to warn the colonel that Mrs. Wynston was on her way and would be there in a few minutes. But the colonel would listen to nothing except the dogs. Two good miles behind Ole Reliable followed the carriage, with Mrs. Wynston, the bishop and other clergy. Providence did not take the colonel into confidence, and he failed to hear the approaching footsteps of those things which were about to happen.

Dan Jamison sat his mule grimly, gazed at the Beast and listened to the frantic baying of the dogs. "Well, Kunnel, what are you goin' to do about it?" he said at last.

The colonel's eye ran up and down the river—he knew there wasn't a boat within ten miles.

"Give me your rifle—I'll try a shot from here."

"No siree! You're a mighty good shot, but no man can't gamble on killin' at that distance. That's the Beast; ef you don't kill him plumb dead he'll slash up them dogs so you kin strain 'em through a sifter."

"Suppose we send a negro over there to shoot him."

Ole Reliable heard the suggestion to send a negro; he pricked up his ears, scrambled off on all-fours and dived into the woods, immediately preceding the cook and camp-boy. The colonel blinked at the sud-

den vacancy behind him. "What has gone with all those negroes?"

Dan grinned. "They tuk to the woods. Try yo' horn; mebbe they'll come back."

"Well," said the colonel, "I'm not going to stand here all day and see my dogs killed—I've got a score to settle with the Beast and I'll swim for it." He shucked his coat and hung it on a limb. Dan climbed down from his mule and shook hands solemnly. "Kunnel, you're a sport from the heart; but there ain't no flies on me. Don't you never think I'm goin' to let you kill the Beast by yo'self."

Both of them looked at Al French. Al shook his head and answered: "The world is your'n, gentlemen; help yo'selves. Thar's the river and yonder's the b'ar. Dive in, it's my treat."

The colonel peeled his trousers and tossed them across a limb beside the coat. Al grinned. "Sunday-go-to-meetin's got kinder mussed, ain't they, Kunnel?"

"Shut up; hand me your gun."

"Take her with my blessin', she's my proxy."

Dan trotted in less elaborate harness. He gave himself a shake or two, then commenced wading up and down the river bank, trying to dislodge a log, while the colonel made ready for his long swim.

"Kunnel," he called out between chatters, "t'ain't

no log big enough to ferry our clothes—we can't take nuthin' but shoes an' hats."

Al's hat was of the conical kind, but the colonel borrowed it and wasn't particular. Al sat his mule bareheaded and gibed at Dan: "Is the water cold?" Dan treated this and subsequent remarks with contemptuous silence until Al grunted: "Huh! you're a purty-lookin' thing to be puttin' on airs—better put on some breeches."

They tied their shoes and guns carefully on top of the log, then swam at either side to keep it from turning over.

The swimmers fought their way sturdily upstream and across, coming out of the water with guns in one hand and shoes in the other.

"Them sho' is two comical old roosters with their feathers pulled off," Al remarked to himself; "but they's game roosters fer shore."

When the white men got across the river, Ole Reliable and the other negroes thought it safe to creep out of the woods. They sat in a row on a log, craning their long necks like mud turtles, watching developments. "White folks sho' is got curyus ways to have fun," Zack observed to the cook.

Two determined hunters climbed the slippery bank, pressed forward into the deadening, and halted abruptly at the brier patch. Dan went poking around

with his gun and reported: "'Tain't no path, Kunnel."

"Grin and bear it, we've got to go through, we can't turn back." Taking his hat in one hand and his gun-barrel in the other to ward off thorns, the colonel bravely led the way. They stepped along very gingerly, with exceeding care and Christian fortitude.

"Them fellows must have hides like a rhynossy-roarus," observed Al.

The two men came in close range of the Beast, and the dogs paid no attention. They acted fairly with each other, raised their guns together and let go four barrels at once.

The Beast tumbled out in a heap, stone dead, and the dogs pounced on him.

Dan ran in, caught Rowdy by the hind leg, and jerked him away for fear the beast might not be dead. Rowdy glared at his master, growled and rushed in again.

The colonel strode among his own dogs, kicking right and left to keep them from destroying the magnificent skin. He could do nothing with the new dogs, so he caught Bugler by the collar and hurled him backward. Bugler did not recognize him; he snarled and snapped and showed his fangs. The growl attracted Shag, who turned, squared himself, and leaped straight at his master. The surprised

colonel struck him with the gun and knocked him down.

"Huh, Kunnel," observed Dan, "yo' dog don't know you in that rig."

Suddenly old Rowdy squared himself and began baying furiously at Dan; the pack gathered for an attack on the men, big dogs in front, little dogs behind, snapping and yelping. Dan cussed and cajoled and thrashed about him; the dogs were mad with excitement and didn't recognize their masters.

Dan backed up against the colonel and the men faced each way. It was no use calling the dogs by name; their threats and their flattery were drowned in a howling clamor.

Twenty-five frenzied dogs began to circle around the two men, bounding back and forth, tramping down the briers, and baying their masters harder than they had bayed the Beast.

The men coaxed and stormed, snapped their fingers at them, called "Rowdy!" "Music!" Shag!" but the dogs were in a panic—deaf, blind, infuriated.

It broke the colonel's heart to see Shag and Bugler arrayed against him—red-eyed, bloody-mouthed and powerful, with every hair turned wrong.

He knew these two dogs, knew their habit of getting close together for a combined assault.

"Come, Dan," he said, "let's get out of this."

The men, back to back, slapping with their hats,

kicking and belaboring with their gun-barrels, commenced retreating through the briers. They had no time to pick their way, no time for anything.

Shag and Bugler got together, edged near the front of the pack and prepared for their famous spring. Both men realized their danger.

"Shag! Bugler! Down!" the colonel shouted. He might as well have whistled to a cyclone.

They sprang together, open-mouthed, their lips curled back, and were beaten down by the guns. The men gained twenty feet through the thicket, briers to the contrary notwithstanding.

"Speak kindly to your little dogs," Al jeered from across the river, which undammed a flood of profanity on the other side.

Nobody heard Mrs. Wynston's carriage approach along the muffled road. The first thing that Al knew, Mrs. Wynston sprang out and ran to that black suit hanging on a bush. "Something has happened to the colonel! He's drowned! He's drowned!"

Al glanced across the river. The two men were fighting their way backward down the steep bank, shouting, yelling and "cussin' scandalous."

He saw the near-sighted bishop blinking from the carriage, and those huge spectacles of the other clergy. Billy Wade stepped to the ground and stood there undecidedly. Then Al made a sneak and

joined the negroes who were already in the woods. Mrs. Wynston began to scream, "Where is the colonel? Where is the colonel?"

There was nobody to answer except a petrified camp-boy too scared to run. Mrs. Wynston grabbed him, shook him, pounded him. "Where is the colonel? Don't you hear?"

An uproar of invective came from across the river, with one clear voice in the lead. "Dat's him," chattered the boy, pointing with his finger.

Mrs. Wynston stared and screamed; the colonel turned his head for one busy instant, then both looked the other way. Billy came running down and led his sister back to the carriage.

"Dan, you get across the best way you can," remarked the colonel, whacking Shag over the head with his gun-stock. "I'll stay here with the dogs."

After he had backed out neck-deep in the water he glanced across the river again. The carriage was traveling, the driver whipping his horses. The colonel threw an arm over the log and paddled back, knocking dogs in the head as he came.

Al, Billy and the three negroes waited at the water's edge, each with a club to beat off the pack.

As the colonel came out of the water he said: "Now, look here, Al, I don't want to hear a word out of you—or anybody else," which he meant.

Then he sat down on a tuft of grass and began to

wash the blood off his legs. His back looked like a map of central Indiana with the railroads done in red.

Ole Reliable knew better than to open his mouth. Without a comment he helped the colonel to dress. "Now, bring my horse." The colonel mounted and rode straight toward the railroad station. Ole Reliable trudged behind him. It was not a conversational journey.

"Take your time, Zack; it will be five hours before the first train passes."

The distance between them widened; the old negro hobbled along. Presently he sat down in the dust and took off his shoes. "White folks may love dis here huntin' bizness, but I wish I war back home in dat jail."

CHAPTER VI

HE ENTERTAINS AN ANGEL AND CATCHES THE DEVIL

DURING the week after the bear hunt Colonel Spottiswoode lived in a ferment of bad humor, irritated in mind and galled in body. He could not sit comfortably; there was no position in which his clothes did not rub raw one of those innumerable gashes. And there was no mental attitude that did not bring him back to that humiliating climax which capped his slaying of the Beast.

The colonel twisted and squirmed, Zack stood by him with helpless hands. Then the colonel swore. "Get away from here, Zack; standing there grinning behind my back."

"I ain't grinnin', Cunnel—Gawd knows I ain't."

"Well, you want to grin—get out of here."

Of course Zack wanted to grin, but after a week of banishment at home he would have traded that desire to grin for something that satisfied his desire to eat.

The morning sun slanted across Ole Reliable's front gallery, spattering it with cottonwood shadows; a huge blot in the middle resembled a bulldog that had been flattened by a steam roller.

Drif sat with his back to the street, his head cocked to one side and eyes glued upon the door. Like Joan of Arc, he was listening to voices. With corrugated ribs and grumbling vacancy between them, Drif wore Joan's expression of spirituality, but he wasn't seeing visions of war. He agreed with General Sherman's definition, and believed in arbitration. In the early morning Drif always listened at this door, catching the cue for his diplomatic behavior. Before Selina came out he always wanted to know whether it were best to wag his stump and ingratiate himself—back off to the edge of the gallery—or to crawl under the house and hide behind the chimney. Drif heard voices, and there was no miracle about it. Selina was coming out. Being uncertain what to do he compromised by retiring half-way of the gallery when Selina flung open the door.

The big black woman slammed down her basket and rearranged the pans. They rattled noisily, and Drif could tell from the sound that they were empty. The dog looked at the man, and the man looked at the dog; each had a fellow-feeling for the other's unfurnished apartment. Every morning these pans went away empty, so did Zack and Drif. Every afternoon the pans came back full. Every afternoon Zack and Drif came back.

Zack talked seductively from the doorway while

Selina covered her pans with a gingham apron. He dilated upon secret society gossip, and watched Selina's lips for a smile that did not show up.

"You ought to seed what we done to dat country nigger in de lodge. Ef you won't tell nobody—"

Selina snatched up her basket, "Zack, you done tole me mo' lies dan enough 'bout dat lodge tomfoolery. Ef you's still talkin' fo' dat two bits you might jes' as well keep yo' mouf shet; 'tain't doin' you no mo' good dan a mustard plaster on a wooden leg."

Selina formed a competent procession all by herself. Zack fell in behind and followed to the front fence. "Seliny, jes' ten cents—I wants a cup o' coffee."

Selina stopped, Zack stopped, and Drif back-stood him from a safe distance.

"You don't git no dime."

Zack jewed himself down fifty per cent. and suggested, "I kin make out wid a nickel fer some tobacco."

But she declined to play the five-cent limit.

Selina felt among the creases about her middle, found a sunken cord and tightened it. Then she hoisted her dress three inches above the dew, tucked it under the belt and marched on. Drif sat down in the dust. Zack limped back to the steps. He took out a clay pipe, knocked it on the edge of the gal-

lery and blew through the stem. Never had it seemed so clean and empty. Then he spread a piece of paper, knelt down as low as he could get and turned his pockets inside out. With infinite care he saved the tobacco dust and filled his pipe. The old man sat with his chin in his hand, turning loose an economical puff when he could hold it no longer, and watching Selina.

Selina took long strides for a fat woman, and there was something inexorable in the expression of her heels as they kicked up her dress behind. Zack shook his head; there was no use hoping.

Then Zack saw something—something that made him spring up and emit a generous cloud of smoke. He ran to the end of the gallery. "Huh! dat's Bully Bing."

Bully Bing—nobody knew what the name meant, but everybody knew him, and he was coming down the side street—a burly yellow man with breeches of gorgeous stripe and hue. It was Bully Bing, synonym for cigars, whisky, cash—tales of adventure with dice and pasteboards. For Bing was a gambler, and he got the stuff.

Ole Reliable gazed. A riot of joy burst across the glory-guarded hills of Vicksburg. The sun shone, the birds sang, the flowers bloomed. The water ran on merrily past the river-girdled town. But—and his pulses stopped—if Bing kept on and

Selina kept on, they would bump into each other at the corner. And Selina had a prejudy agin' 'im. Bing and his rascally methods were the honest woman's pet abomination. Ole Reliable tried to shout, but like a man in a dream his tongue refused to work. He could see both of them coming closer and closer together, but neither one could see the other. In another minute there would be a transit, or a collision. All the strength of Ole Reliable's soul went out in one silent and despairing message —a telepathic, wireless, mesmeric message. Bing heard it, and got a hunch. Whenever Bing held a pair of deuces, and a psychological hunch, he played the hand to a show-down. If he held three aces and a hunch that they were beat, he chucked 'em in the discards. Now he had a powerful hunch to stop and dodge behind a fence. Through a kindly crack he watched Selina until she climbed the hill and vanished on the other side.

Then Bing emerged, chuckling and cheery. Zack believed in meeting good things a little more than half way. He hustled to the corner and caught his prosperous relative with both hands. "Bless de Lawd, ef here ain't Bing, my own dead sister's boy. Whar *is* you been all dis time? Come right on home wid me."

Bing gladdened the old man's heart by more than equal cordiality. He even put an arm around his

uncle as he responded: "I ain't got no time to fool away in Vicksburg; jes' drapped in from Memphis an' N'Yawleens, but I couldn't pass throo widout seein' Uncle Zack. Does dey still call you 'Ole Reliable?'"

"Sholy, sholy—everybody, white an' black, calls me 'Ole Reliable.'"

Arm in arm they passed through the gate, and Ole Reliable placed Selina's rocking-chair in the middle of the kitchen. In the kitchen they were safer from observation.

"Set down, Bing, an' make yo'sef easy. Lemme res' yo' hat."

When Bing pulled off his derby—in two shades of brown—it uncovered a perfectly naked head, knotty like an Irish potato, and shaven clean. Before bending a knee he hitched up his trousers so they would not bag. A band of silk ran down the sides of his legs. Bing always affected this pleasing eccentricity, and always wore patent-leather shoes with gray cloth tops. His double-breasted vest had pearl-gray buttons—big as a dollar—matching the tops of his shoes.

Zack paused to admire the elegance with which his nephew lounged back in Selina's chair and whistled a sporty tune. The old man smiled in his heart; Bing's money came easy, and he was just as likely to shell out a dollar as a nickel.

Bing stretched himself with a beautiful manifestation of the home-coming instinct. "It feels mighty good to be talkin' wid kin folks. I gits tired o' Saint Louey an' N'Yawleens." He spoke so feelingly of his affection for kin folks that Zack mentally doubled the amount of his prospective touch.

Drif poked his head in and, feeling the atmosphere of brotherly love, came lumbering toward them. Bing eyed him like a connoisseur, patted him on the head and they made friends. Drif's disposition had sweetened with adversity. "I been hearin' a lot about dis dog in Saint Louey. Everybody is braggin' 'bout Ole Reliable an' Drif. You-all sho' did make a rep."

Drif wagged the stump of his tail, and Zack wagged himself all over. It was good to be famous. "Dat dog done hissef proud in Saint Louey. He sholy brought me a pile o' money," remarked Zack with an air of easy affluence. "Jes' like stealin' candy from blind babies."

"So dem niggers tole me. Dey tell me you cleaned up scads o' coin, 'specially when Drif kilt dat dog from Kansas City."

"Huh! Dat Kansas City pup didn't make chewin'-gum fer Drif."

"How much did you win?"

"Three or four hundred—I fergits."

"He 'pears like a mighty good fighter." Bing

leaned back and surveyed the dog, with his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. "Well, Uncle, how is tricks?"

"Fine—comin' so rapid an' reglar I stayed home to rest." As Zack was meditating a loan he recommended himself very highly. It would be a shame to strike the opulent Bing for two bits, so he leaned forward and inquired, "Times pretty good wid you?"

Bing laughed. "Fine ain't no name fer it. I quit runnin' wid cheap niggers, no tin-horn gamblers fer me—I'm playin' de ponies."

"Ponies is some out o' my juishdiction. Ain't de ponies mighty hard to guess?"

"Sho', ef you has to *guess* 'em; but dey's easy ef you know."

"How is dat? How *kin* you know?"

Bing winked very wisely. "You got to know de jockeys, give 'em a few drinks, maybe ten dollars or fifty, an' find out how de ponies is goin' to run. Den whenever you wants two or three hundred plunks jes' go down to de track an' git it."

This was sweet music to Zack; he would be a piker to ask for less than ten. He drew his chair closer and was already selecting the words—a casual, doesn't-matter-if-you-don't kind of a phrase that would slip off his tongue like an oily accident—when Bing beat him to it.

"Uncle, if 'twon't be no trouble, you kin lemme

have a ten-spot until I git my spondulicks from de bank in N'Yawleens. I'll pass it back dis ebenin'."

Zack drew a sharp breath as the ice-water hit him in the face. He shut up, like a 'possum-whiskered banker turning down a gold-brick proposition. He sat back in his chair and demanded,

"What you want wid ten dollars?"

Then it was that Bing assumed the borrower's blandness. "Tuk a notion to pick up a couple o' hundred dis mornin'."

"Huh, dat's good. Jes' pick it up an' pass dat ten-spot back to yo'sef dis ebenin'."

Bing wriggled. "I got to hab de ten befo' I kin win de two hundred."

"How you spec to win dat much?"

Then the man of wisdom leaned forward and explained: "Crackerjack wins dat second race in Memphis to-day; Vicksburg suckers don't know how de race is fixed."

Ole Reliable stuck his head close to this knowledgy nephew. During his brief sporting experience he had heard it intimated that things might be "fixed," and much honest profit gained thereby. "How is it fixed?" he asked.

Bing whispered in strict confidence: "King Leo, he's de favorite, but his rider is crooked. Dat nigger kin swaller a wire nail an' spit up a corkscrew. He's jes' dat crooked. We done paid him fifty dol-

lars to make a foul, an' Crackerjack wins. It's a leadpipe cinch. Put up ten an' pull down two hundred or three hundred, same as pickin' up clods in de road. But I tuk a few drinks las' night which turned me a fool an' spent all my money. I 'lowed to step down here an' git de ten from you. We'll go half-an'-half. Us better hustle befo' dese suckers gits wise."

Bing arose and held out his hand; from the assurance of his gesture he might well have been halfway to town with the money. Zack tightened his lips like a miser's purse-string, and shook his head. "You wants to gamble; I don't 'low nobody to gamble wid my money."

Bing had a quick suggestion. "Den *you* make de bet—dat's jes' de same."

"No, sir—I done got burnt on a hoss-race. While I war at de races in Saint Louey a slick-looking nigger put me on to sumpin' he called a cinch, jes' like you spoke it, 'a leadpipe cinch'—an' I drapped twenty-five."

Bing threw back his head and roared. "Dem niggers touted you; played you fer a easy mark." His high good humor failed to win a responsive smile. Ole Reliable looked mighty solemn. "Ef 'twas a dog-fight—bettin' on a dog, dat's a sure thing, ain't it, Drif?"

Drif twitched his stub and Ole Reliable tilted his

hat to one side, for the spirit of sporty days swept over him again.

Bing did some rapid-fire thinking, which gave his uncle a chance to consider. At first the gambler put up such a stiff front that he dazzled the old man. Passing over these glittering generalities Uncle Zack began to observe details. Bing used to flash a diamond ring—which was gone. Upon his last visit he had sported an opal scarf-pin—which was gone. He had worn a double-festoon watch-chain, heavy enough to hold a steamboat, with a dangling charm. These were absent, too. This dearth of jewelry and charm was still causing a mild wonderment when Bing inquired, "What time is it?"

Ole Reliable looked at Selina's clock. "Nigh on to seben o'clock; ain't yo' watch runnin'?"

"No. I drapped it, an' dat feller in N'Yawleens is tryin' to fix it. He ain't no 'count; he couldn't fix a plow p'int."

As Uncle Zack was expected to put up the money, he assumed the pawn-broker's prerogative of personal questions: "Bing, you's quit wearin' dat diamond ring?"

"My gal tuk a likin' to it. I gits sick o' diamonds."

"Whar's dat necktie pin—the big un wid de sparkles?"

"Anudder gal swiped dat. Wimmen pesters me a heap 'bout jew'lry."

Bing waved his hand grandiloquently and dished out a sumptuous course of conversation, but the signboards did not point to prosperity. Finally he came back to the essential elements: "Uncle Zack, hurry up now an' lemme have dat ten? You can't lose."

"How come I can't lose? You lost yo' watch an' diamond ring an' dat pin what you had."

When anybody called Bing's bluff he always laid down and got off as cheaply as he could—that's good gambling. "Uncle, I'm gwine to tell you de troof: I been playin' in hard luck. De bad streak started jes' two weeks ago dis las'-gone Saddy. I was in a sucker game wid three big stacks in front o' me, an' chipped away two of 'em drawin' to flushes. Den I made a flush an' los' de udder stack. Atter dat de cards run tougher an' tougher, until las' Monday mornin', jes' as de clock struck fo'—exactly at fo' o'clock—all of a sudden my luck changed, an' got wuss. Dat's when I lost my jew'lry."

Uncle Zack listened with his head cocked wisely to one side, "Huh!" he observed; "dat's de gen'l complaint all over town—de way de cards is runnin'."

Bing would have made a persistent lawyer; he kept hammering at the main chance. "Dis tip on Crackerjack is de fust straight goods I'se had fer a month. I must git a stake somewhar."

His appeal might have drawn blood from a turnip, but it couldn't bleed a cent out of Ole Reliable. There was a reason.

"None o' my money goes on *dat*. Ain't I been tellin' you 'bout dis gamblin'? You done frolicked yo' money off on craps an' poker an' sech like."

Bing straightened up and demanded, "Didn't you git yo' money on dog-fights?"

"Huh! I don't call dat gamblin'. You knows exactly what a bulldog's gwine to do, but you can't tell nothin' about a tricky hoss wid a crooked nigger on top of 'im."

Bing wasn't hunting an argument; he wanted a stake. "All right, Uncle, I ain't 'sputin' yo' word. Dat's past an' gone. Jes gimme fo' bits to git breakfast."

"Nary a cent. Ef yo had fo' bits you'd go right up town an try to beat a crap game fer ten dollars."

The seventh son of a seventh son could not have predicted more truly. Bing grinned—then broke down and laughed. "Dat's good; I'm up agin it. Uncle, I ain't been to sleep fer three nights an' ain't et nuthin'. I'd be thankful fer a place to lie down an' take a nap while you gits me a bite."

"Turn in an' I'll send fer a breakfust."

Zack promised with a beautiful faith that the gods would provide the rations. He took up his hat and started off; then he turned. "Shut de do' an' keep

mighty quiet; some o' dese niggers might tote de news to Seliny. She's comin' home at three o'clock."

"She won't ketch me here." The two were agreed upon that.

Bing stumbled into the next room and fell across the bed. Zack made half a dozen false starts before he got his mind set, and struck a hot trail for Colonel Spottiswoode's. It was the colonel's breakfast-hour. A knock on the door of hope, with skill and finesse, would bring a handout. Being a tactful person and a shrewd judge of white folks, Zack reconnoitered. He wondered if the colonel's wounds had begun to heal, and his mind to resume its jovial nonchalance. "I'll know de minit I clap eyes on 'im." Zack felt sure of that. Through an open window he saw the colonel sitting alone at the breakfast-table. Zack noted the thoughtful attitude, the half-smile, the curling smoke from a cigar and the manner in which Colonel Spottiswoode handled his newspaper. Luck was with him. He tightened his hat with businesslike precision, opened the gate and hurried around to the rear. Zack stepped up on the back gallery as if he hadn't a moment to lose and rapped importantly upon the open kitchen door. The fat cook barred his entrance, but that didn't matter, for Zack was "a persuadin' nigger" with women.

"Good mornin', Aunt Abby. You's lookin' fine; you gits better lookin' every time I sees you."

"Dey ain't no breakfust here fer you. Git out o' my kitchen."

Zack rewarded her hospitality with a pleasant smile. "I want to see de Cunnel."

"He don't want to see you; ain't never axed fer you;—he's eatin' breakfust." Aunt Abby dropped into a kitchen chair and jerked off first one shoe, then the other and stuck her feet into a pair of carpet slippers. "Dese shoes was killin' me."

"War dat what had you riled? I kin fix it. Seliny loves to wear new shoes. I'll take dese home an' git her to break 'em. She's got a bigger foot dan what you is."

As Zack spoke he wrapped the shoes in a piece of newspaper and tucked them under his arm. Aunt Abby smiled at his gallantry. "I'm more'n obleeged to you—more'n obleeged. Here's some new stockings what ain't neber been wore. Take dem along an' dey'll keep de shoes from hurtin'."

The stockings were blatantly new and brilliantly striped. Zack stuffed them in his pocket. "I'll fetch 'em back Saddy night, so you kin wear 'em Sunday."

All the doors were open, and Zack lifted his voice so that it went straight to the dining-room. "I tole de Cunnel I'd git 'im some pea sticks. I never likes to promise nuthin' an' den not do it."

An answering voice came back: "Is that you, Zack? Come right in."

Zack smiled his "tole you so" at the cook as he shuffled through the kitchen and dropped his hat at the dining-room door. "Good mornin', Cunnel."

"Good morning, Zack. What did I hear you say?"

"Huh, war you lissenen'? I war jes' tellin' Aunt Abby dat I laid off to be gettin' some sticks fer yo' peas. Dere's plenty fine young cane out yonder, an' I 'lowed to go git 'em."

Colonel Spottiswoode smiled curiously, and almost laughed aloud—almost had it on the tip of his tongue to ask Zack a disquieting question. But he didn't; he called the cook instead: "Good! Aunt Abby—" The cook came and stood in the door, glaring at Ole Reliable. She knew what that meant—her lawful spoil would be gobbled up by a man who was hollow plumb down to his toes. "Get a hatchet for Uncle Zack. Have you had breakfast?"

"Yas suh; had a snack, but—"

"Take a cup of coffee and a bite before you go. Aunt Abby, fix up a lunch and put it in a bucket. You'll get mighty hungry cutting cane."

"Cuttin' cane? Huh!" grumbled the woman as she waddled back to the kitchen; "cuttin' cane!"

Zack had his coffee and bite, etcetera—diversified etcetera—until Aunt Abby stood over him and demanded: "Ef you hadn't had *no* breakfust how many biskits *could* you eat?"

"Jes' many as you kin make. Everywhere else I eats cornbread, 'cause dey don't know how to make biskits like your'n."

Then he started with his hatchet and bucket of lunch, Aunt Abby's shoes, stockings and good wishes, for Zack was a diplomat; and he left her grinning in the kitchen.

Colonel Spottiswoode followed him to the front gate. "Where are you going?"

Zack indicated the rugged country among the hills south of town.

"Take this quarter; ride on the street-car as far as it goes."

"Thankee, Cunnel; thankee."

Ole Reliable pranced off as if life were a joyful holiday for cutting cane. The white man stood on the gallery watching the negro, and smiling. "I wonder does he really think he's fooling me—cutting pea sticks half a year in advance. Oh, well, maybe he's hungry and wants some tobacco money." Then the colonel went back to his newspaper, still smiling. After Ole Reliable left Colonel Spottiswoode's he turned a couple of corners so as to feel safe, then stopped to buy a nickel sack of tobacco and fire up his pipe. With his furnace going at full blast he faced toward home and forgot to hurry.

From the brow of the hill he could look down on his own gallery, four blocks away. He saw a man

come out of the door with a bundle under his arm and hurry away in the direction of town.

He stopped, looked, and slapped his leg in disgust. "Dat's jes' like a nigger. De minit you leaves him by hissef he studies 'bout stealin' sumpin'. But dat ain't Bing—dat's a lame nigger." Zack broke into a run, but he kept dropping Aunt Abby's shoes and long before he got home he'd let the lame negro escape. Ole Reliable rushed into the house and roused Bing, who lay asleep in his underclothes. "Git up from dar. Somebody done stole everything we got."

"Who? What?"

"Nigger—gone—wid a bundle." Zack looked breathlessly around the room to see what was missing.

Bing smiled sleepily and turned over. "Dem was my clo'es, what I sont to de pressin' club."

"Huh! Mighty stylish fer a busted nigger."

"Dat's de time to ack stylish, so folks won't know you'se broke."

Ole Reliable saw the point and laughed. "Here, Bing, git up an' eat yo' breakfast while it's hot."

Zack leaned his elbows on the table and watched Bing stoking the bucket of grub. All the time he was conscious that something was gone. Something had vanished—there was a hiatus in the scenery. What could it be—furniture? Clock? Vases? He rose and rambled, looked under the bed, peeped into

the kitchen; then his face cleared and he sat down again.

"Answer me dis one question. Bing, did you send yo' derby an' dem shoes to de pressin' club? I wants to know *dat.*"

Bing pushed aside the empty bucket, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and laid down his knife. "You sho' is one mistrustful ole man—won't take nobody's word fer nuthin'. Den lissen to me. I sont dem clo'es to de pawnbroker an' got five dollars. I'm playin' a hunch, an' bettin' de clo'es off my back. Dat's what I call a dead-game sport."

Uncle Zack stared at the gambler, mouth wide open. "Well, well, well; ef dat don't beat de Jews! Here you is widout a rag to yo' back!"

"Never let dat worry you. I'm president o' de Don't Worry Club."

"Dat's all right, but when Seliny comes home you'll see somebody what's worried sho' 'nuff, an' 'tain't gwine to be Seliny."

"I'll have plenty money befo' she gits home; an' done lit out o' dis house—you hear me talkin'?"

"S'pose dat hoss don't win?"

"Crackerjack is boun' ter win; 'tain't nuthin' else to it."

"I hope he do; you's gwine to need clo'es mighty bad."

Zack sat in Selina's chair and fidgeted, watching

the clock. Every once in a while he shuffled about the room with the furtive movement of a pet 'coon that is expecting to be put out. Then he had an idea —an idea in shoes and stockings. He laid the new shoes on the seat of a chair, smoothed out the stockings and draped them across the back. The light was best at the front window, so he placed them there like a Christmas gift. Selina couldn't miss seeing the layout, and Zack hoped those stockings would start a diverting conversation. They did.

A sudden creak of the front steps chilled him to the marrow. But it was only the lame negro.

"Here's de tickets what de gent'man sent me fer."

Bing sat up in bed. The pawn-ticket he tossed aside; its contents were quite familiar. The other ticket had some blue pencil marks on it which meant nothing to Zack, although Bing appeared satisfied. "Twenty-six to one," he remarked.

"Yas suh," said the lame man; "but dey backed him down to eighteen. Lot o' folks is bettin' on Crackerjack."

"Huh! I knowed dem Memphis niggers couldn't keep nuthin'. You hold de pawn-ticket an' bring back my things." Bing dismissed his messenger with the air of a cabinet minister.

Zack performed a problem in mental arithmetic. "Dat means you gwine to git a hundred an' thirty?"

"Sholy."

"Befo' Seliny comes home?"

Bing rolled over on the bed and laughed and laughed and laughed. "I wouldn't be a married man fer nuthin'."

Ole Reliable flared up. "Better quit laughin' at me. Can't never tell what's gwine to happen to you. Puts me in mind of a feller what laughed at another nigger wid his ear cut off, 'cause de nigger looked so lopsided. Dat very day he had a fight and got his nose bit off. Den he looked a heap more funnier dan de lopsided nigger. Dat's what *he* got fer laughin'."

Bing went to sleep as peacefully as a fat baby, while Zack watched for Selina and watched for the lame negro.

The expected came unexpectedly. Selina's sunbonnet appeared. Zack rushed back and shook Bing into a half-stupor. "Here she comes, here she comes!" Then he darted out of the house and ran to meet his wife.

"Hold on, Seliny, hold on! Don't come way down de hill." He waved his hand and shouted. When he reached the top of the long hill he was out of breath and gasped his message. "A boy come an' say Sis Minervy's dyin'. De preacher is dere an' dey wants you, bein's you's de presidin' officer. Git on dis street-car. Here's a dime. I jes' wanted to save you dat long walk."

"I didn't know Sis Minervy was sick!" said Selina.

"She war tuk down sudden." Zack told his story under strong excitement, and it carried conviction. He shoved Selina to the car and bundled her aboard, then hurried back to the house with the basket of victuals and left it on the gallery. That's where Drif came in. Being an empty dog he found a full basket, and reversed the situation while Zack was telling Bing the news.

"Got to git out, Bing; she won't be gone long."

"Can't go widout clo'es—cops'll git me."

"You'll wish dey had."

Bing turned upon his uncle and demanded: "What fer you tell Seliny dat lie? You'll make her madder dan ever."

Ole Reliable shook his head. "She'll be jes' 'bout as mad as she kin git. A little mo' ain't gwine to hurt."

"Here now, Uncle, I tell you what you kin do—jes' run up dere and find out about dat race; dis here lame nigger travels too slow to suit my case."

Bing hustled Zack off to the pool-room, gave him specific instructions how to find it: "Up-stairs—'way in the back. Be mighty careful—find out about the race." Zack headed for town on a dead run.

If Zack hadn't been mighty spry Selina and Sis Minervy would have beat him home. As it was they

were only two blocks behind when he cleared the gallery at a jump. Bing sat in the rocking-chair, maddeningly complacent. Drif slept on the gallery beside the overturned basket, his stomach puffed out like a toy balloon.

"Git up, Bing, an' hide; put on dat wrapper," gasped Zack.

"How 'bout de race?"

"Ain't heard from it yit. We's goin' to hear from Seliny right away."

Bing could see the two women coming, and began to smell a crisis. "What we speck to do?"

"Us won't have to do nuthin'; she'll 'tend to dat."

Zack pulled down the window and sneaked out on the gallery. Then he threw up both arms and ran to the gate with a glad cry: "Praise Gawd, Sis Minervy! Dat boy skeered me terrible."

All three of them saw the front door being softly closed and heard the click of the lock. "Who dat you got hid in my house?" Selina demanded.

Zack made no unnecessary answer, for Selina went to see. The women passed him; Zack stopped midway between the house and the gate. Drif saved Selina the trouble of kicking him off the gallery, which surely was thoughtful of Drif. The black woman tried the door—it was locked. Then she ran to the window and peered in. "Look dere, Sis Minervy; see fer yo'sef dem striped stockin's—

an' women's shoes. You Zack!" She heard the patter of bare feet inside, and Zack came running.

"Lemme explain."

"Splainin' time is done gone by. Dat's how come you tol' me dat lie 'bout Sis Minervy. Open dis do', you hussy! open dis do'." With three hundred pounds of wrath against it the door fell in. Zack heard a yell from Bing, heard the smash of chairs and crash of crockery. He was afraid to stay and afraid to run when he saw Bing's naked head being bumped against the floor.

"Hit's a man, a man!" Sis Minervy screamed, and two women got up, gasping with surprise.

Zack dashed in to defend his injured innocence.

"Jes' look at you! You-all done woke Bing up!"

Selina stood over the prostrate man and stirred him with her foot. "Git up from dere an' dress yo'sef; ain't you shamed! Whar's yo' clo'es?"

"Sont 'em over to de pressin' club."

"You triflin', gamblin' nigger—come here to my house an' waller over my bed. Let de dog eat up de dinner, broke my chair—"

"I'll pay fer it."

"I don't want none o' yo' gamblin' money. I wants to fight you all over dis yard, and den fight you some in de street."

Selina's intense surprise gave the two men a chance to explain as much as they thought she ought

to know, which culminated in Bing's attractive proposition: "Soon as dat man comes wid my money I'm gwine to pay you twenty-five dollars."

Selina shook her head and sat down outside the door; twenty-five dollars—she meant to watch that hole till the rabbit came out. "You niggers is been lyin' so plentiful I'm gwine to set right here an' see."

Bing and Zack looked at each other, the clock, the road, each with the unspoken inquiry, "See any dust risin'?"

Presently a dust did rise, and a lame negro hobbled out of it with a bundle under his arm.

"Crackerjack wins!" whispered Bing. "I had a hunch."

Zack ran out to meet the lame negro and waved his hand triumphantly to Bing. Selina rose with her arms akimbo—they must prove it to her.

Bing, in a faded blue wrapper, lounged carelessly in the door, while the messenger handed him a roll of bills.

"Dere's a hundred an' twenty-three dollars an' six bits—I paid de pawnbroker six an' a quarter."

"You jes' keep dat little change," Bing remarked, counting his money nonchalantly. The lame negro pocketed the silver and Selina's eyes bulged. Bing skinned off five fives and laid them in her hand. "Dat pays fer de things you broke. Here's a extry five to buy a new wrapper, jes fer luck."

Ole Reliable broke into a guffaw. "Seliny, what did you say 'bout gamblin' money—you wouldn't hab none of it?"

Selina wheeled: "I don't call dis gamblin' money. Gamblin' money is what you goes and loses shootin' craps."

Bing had started in as Prince Bountiful, and he played it to a fare-you-well.

"Come on, you-all; less go to de restaraw an' git some dinner in place o' dat what Drif et up."

When the four of them started out of the gate Seliny's heart had melted into mush. Drif, conscious of guilt, came apologetically half way to the fence. Zack drove him back with a brick and it was Seliny who upbraided him. "Look here, Zack, quit 'busin' dat dog. Come 'long, Drif. Po' ole Drif, you never meant no harm."

CHAPTER VII

HE HELPS A WORTHY YOUNG MAN, AND WINS THE LONG-DISTANCE LIAR MEDAL

A WOMAN screamed, a clock struck seven, a dog barked; running footsteps crossed the bridge and died away. The dog hushed, the clock ticked on, the steady drizzle continued without a sound. Water collected beside the slanting roadway and gurgled past the body of the dead.

'Cindy Badger had been murdered, and thrown into a gully at the edge of the road. Many people must have traveled that way, but none saw her body in the darkness. Next morning a hackman found the dead woman lying in a pool of water with her head brutally crushed. Neighbors began to inquire and to remember. Then everybody knew exactly what everybody else knew—and no more. 'Cindy had been killed precisely at seven the evening before; the weapon was an iron spike fourteen inches long and wrapped in wet cloth,—deadly and noiseless; such spikes were used in the construction of barges; one man, perhaps, had run south across the bridge;

another, perhaps, had silently escaped to the north up the muddy road; a mysterious hack had passed, and the darkness swallowed it. Everybody knew this much, but that was all.

Ole Reliable toted the news to Colonel Spottiswoode, where he now had an irregular job with regular meals. Negroes talked of nothing else but "Who killed 'Cindy?" And Zack retailed their gossip, with embellishments, at shaving time. Every morning he and the colonel had the same discussion over again with such additional facts and fiction as the day brought forth.

"Well, Zack, anything new?" the colonel would inquire. Then Zack would stop in the middle of the floor, mixing lather and swapping guesses with the colonel.

"How come 'Cindy way out here on de Hall's Ferry Road when she lived way down yonder by de river? Some niggers say dat one o' de lodge sisters war sick, an' 'Cindy war comin' to nuss her—but dat ain't so. Den what become o' dat money what she got frum de lodge when her ma died? She always toted it in her bosom; she warn't robbed, 'cause her dress warn't no wise disturbed? Cunnel, you reckon somebody fooled dat gal way out here in de rain jes to knock her in de head wid a spike? Must ha' been somebody what knowed her mighty good. Cunnel, did you ever see one o' dem barge spikes?

Dey's more'n a foot long an' a inch thick; you could kill a bull wid 'em."

Every morning the same discussion went on, to no conclusion.

Late on the night of the killing the police arrested Bud Lowe, proprietor of the Hot Cat Eating House. They found him at home, walking up and down his room, "Waiting for 'Cindy to come back," so he said. When the officer told him that Lucinda had been killed on the Halls Ferry Road, he exclaimed, "What was 'Cindy doin' way out dere?"

"Now den, Cunnel," argued Ole Reliable, "I is well 'quainted wid Bud, an' dat makes me think he don't know nuthin' 'bout dis killin'. Ef Bud had kilt 'Cindy, he war de onliest man what knowed how come she out dere, an' he don't need to ax anybody. Ef Bud *ain't* kilt 'Cindy, den dat's de fust thing pop in his head, 'How come 'Cindy way out dere in de rain?' What for he want to kill her anyhow? He war her step-daddy an' done raised her from a little gal."

Next morning Ole Reliable rushed into the colonel's room, reeking, running over, rioting with news: "What you reckin, Cunnel? 'Pears like dey gwine to git Bud. Aunt Fanny—she's cook at de Hot Cat—soon as dey show her dat spike she throws up bofe han's an' hollers: 'Dat's de spike what Bud had in de coal-box, to chunk de fire in his stove!' She

allers wuz a plumb fool 'bout talkin' wid her mouf."

Zack fidgeted around and stropped the razor: "Dat's so, Cunnel; Bud did hab a spike in his coal-box. Many's de time I poked de fire wid it. But you kin lissen mighty keen an' you ain't gwine to hear *my* mouf shoot off."

When Aunt Fanny was pinned down to facts, she could not be certain whether it was the identical spike, or one exactly like it, that Bud kept in his coal-box. Having repented her outburst, she would not have testified at all if she hadn't been overheard by a dozen people. Her statement forced the unwilling admission from several loafers around the Hot Cat, that Bud Lowe did have such a barge spike in his coal-box, and that they had frequently used it to stir up the fire.

The colonel was disposed to regard this piece of evidence as a clencher—putting the very weapon in Bud's hands. Ole Reliable shook his head: "Plenty spikes down by de river—anybody could git one."

From that time until the day of trial a virulent epidemic of argument raged among the negroes. Everybody caught the infection—for Bud, or agin him. Lucinda was popular with her lodge; Bud Lowe kept a warm stove in the wintertime and his cronies refused to believe. Both sides grudgingly admitted that there were some things on the other side they couldn't explain.

Then both sides packed the court-room from the iron railing around the bar to its massive walls in the rear. They sat in breathless silence while District Attorney Griscom developed a chain of evidence which drove nail after nail into a gallows for Bud Lowe. "Ole Gris sho' is raw,"—all the negroes commented on his savage prosecution. The jury—twelve white men—fastened their eyes upon each witness—grim, unsmiling, attentive. There was no glancing around the room and nodding to friends. They rarely looked at Bud. Jurors hate to watch a man whom they are making up their minds to hang. Bud himself, stolid and indifferent, listened to the evidence; occasionally he bent forward and whispered something into Billy Marion's ear.

This was Billy's first capital case, and he was keyed up to the highest tension. The hostile atmosphere affected him deeply; sometimes he flinched as the grizzle-haired Griscom hammered on circumstance after circumstance that looked mighty black for Bud.

Griscom had almost concluded the evidence for the State; Billy felt that he was saving his strongest testimony for a powerful impression at the end. The case had been full of surprises, and Billy dreaded each witness that went upon the stand—perhaps a bromide, perhaps a bombshell. Griscom called Aunt Fanny and four other witnesses in succession

to tell about the spike. They trailed each other like ducks going to a pond—cross-examination failed to shake them. Billy did his best, then dropped back in his chair; the testimony was probably true.

Bud Lowe listened vacantly, as if he did not comprehend the effect of these statements.

Then Griscom rose, and announced with dramatic emphasis: "Your Honor, we have driven home our last spike. That is the State's case."

Billy Marion drew a long breath; bad as it was, that was the end. The jury stared at the floor—a sinister omen.

Judge Meredith glanced at the clock: "Gentlemen, it is the dinner hour. We shall suspend until four o'clock. Mr. Sheriff, take charge of the jury."

A mass of black humanity bulged through the door. Court officers and lawyers passed out through the consultation room. Billy Marion found himself crowded beside the district attorney and they went down the street together. "Billy," Griscom remarked; "you can't save that fellow, and I hate to see you worried. My first client got hanged; I know how you feel."

"That's all right, Mr. Griscom," Billy answered, with assurance; "maybe we'll blow you out of the water yet."

Griscom shrugged his shoulders. "I've got to take dinner down town; won't you join me?"

"Thanks, glad to join you; it will save time."

They were about to enter the Garden Restaurant together when a friend of Billy's stopped him on the sidewalk: "Hello, Billy, how's your case coming on?"

"Fine, Henry, fine—it's nothing but a lot of nigger news and suspicion. There's no real evidence against my man."

Griscom smiled. "Billy, I'd give a million for your enthusiasm—and your appetite."

The district attorney stepped into the restaurant, took his seat at the table and called back: "Billy, shall I order for you?"

"Yes, go ahead," Billy nodded, and went on talking with Henry Parker, in plain view of the district attorney. Griscom could see everything that happened. And he saw Ole Reliable come up.

"Howdy, Mister Billy, howdy." Ole Reliable smiled amiably and took off his hat.

"Hello, Uncle Zack—" Billy nodded familiarly. As Billy was the lawyer for Bud Lowe, and was talking about the *cause celèbre,* Ole Reliable frankly stuck in his ear. 'Twarn't no harm for him to listen to what the white folks said.

"The fact is, Henry, Griscom has put in some mighty ugly testimony. You remember that woman was killed with a spike. Griscom proved by five witnesses that Bud Lowe had a spike just like it—*if not*

the same one—in his coal-box. There was the weapon, ready for Bud Lowe to put his hand on it. I've got to meet that evidence some way or other."

"Shucks, Mister Billy, dat spike don't signify nuthin'," interrupted Ole Reliable, so positively that both white men wheeled, and Billy Marion demanded: "What do *you* know about it?"

"Anybody could git a barge spike. Dere's forty cords of 'em stacked upon de levee—scattered aroun'—"

"Where?"

"Everywhere, all up an' down, 'long side de river. I kin go down dere right dis minute, an' git you a wagon load."

"Come on—show me—right now."

Billy caught Uncle Zack by the arm and was leading him away when he remembered his dinner engagement. "Wait here," he whispered, and ran back to the restaurant.

"Mr. Griscom, I'm sorry, but I've got to go and talk with some witnesses; afraid I won't have time for dinner." Billy was gone. Griscom watched him through the window, until he and Zack disappeared down the steep hill toward the steamboat landing. "Now I wonder what he's going to do with that old negro," Griscom mused to himself, then went on with his dinner.

Billy Marion had scarcely dragged Ole Reliable

out of sight before Colonel Spottiswoode sauntered up to the front of the building and looked around. He seemed disappointed and irritated at not finding somebody. Presently he stepped to the door and called a waiter: "Steve, have you seen Ole Reliable?"

"No, suh, he ain't been here."

"Yes he was, Colonel!" corrected Griscom from the table; "he's just this minute gone down the hill with Billy Marion. Come here and sit down with me; maybe they'll be back in a little while."

The colonel lounged over to Griscom's table and sat down.

"Gris, I'm going to change Zack's name, and call him Ole Slippery—can't hold him. Told him to meet me here; wanted him to go down to the boat to get a pair of mules."

Colonel Spottiswoode sat there cross-legged, smoking and chatting, while the district attorney ate his leisurely meal.

For once Ole Reliable had accurate information. He guided Billy Marion to the steamboat landing and proved every word by an ocular demonstration. "Look yonder, Mister Billy, dere's a pile o' dem spikes stacked up same as cord wood; yonder's anudder pile, and dere's anudder. See 'em scattered all 'long de bank, same as chips in de back yard. I tole you it didn't signify nuthin', Bud Lowe havin'

dat spike in his coal box. Hit warn't de onliest spike in de whole world. I don't never aim to say nuthin' what ain't so—ef I makes no mistake."

He stooped and picked up one of the much-talked-of spikes. "Dey's all jes' alike; 'tain't nary one o' dem niggers kin tell de difference 'tween de one what Bud had an' all o' dese."

That put a new idea in Billy Marion's head. Why not produce a dozen of these spikes in court, show how easy they were to get, and how impossible to identify? None of the witnesses had testified to any distinguishing marks.

"Zack, I suppose there must be a thousand of them."

Ole Reliable squinted up and down the river, his lips moved: "No, suh, I don't 'spec' dere's *quite* a thousand—but most."

Billy took his seat on one of the dismantled hulks. Within a stone's throw were half a dozen wrecks; huge-timbered barges that bring coal from western Pennsylvania down the Mississippi River. Some lay rotting where they had stranded. Others had been taken to pieces, the timbers saved, and those enormous spikes piled crosswise. Anybody could get a spike, everybody could get one. Spikes were thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks in Vallombrosa.

Marion sprang to his feet. "Look here, Zack,

I'm going to make you a witness in this case. Come with me and keep your eyes open. Pick up six or eight spikes, at different places, and remember where you got them."

"Yas, suh, I'll sho' do dat. Ef dere's one thing I loves more'n anudder, it's to he'p a young man along."

They tramped for half a mile, up and down the river bank; Billy stopped several times and had Zack count the number of layers in one stack, and the number of spikes to a layer. From that they estimated the total number. They then counted the stacks in sight.

"Now, Zack, can you come to the court-house at four o'clock and tell that jury what you have seen?"

"Shore kin, Mister Billy; I knowed your pa all his life, an' I'd sho' do anything fer you. I believes in he'pin' a young man along."

Ole Reliable went into a warehouse and begged an oat-sack in which to wrap his spikes. It made a heavy load for the long hill.

At the foot of Clay Street they fell in with Mr. Poindexter Adams, manager of the compress. "Hello, Billy; hello, Zack; ain't you two out of your bailiwick? Plotting against the whites?"

Zack grinned and Billy answered: "Uncle Zack was telling me that the river bank was full of these barge spikes and I came down here to see. Mr.

Griscom has been trying to prove that there was only one spike in the world, and that Bud Lowe used it to kill that woman with. Uncle Zack's testimony will knock him out."

"Sho' will!" Zack nodded his head with determination.

Mr. Adams smiled at Zack. "Ole Reliable, are you a cheerful swearer?"

"Don't know, boss; I reckon I kin do pretty well."

"Don't let Griscom catch you in a lie. Hitch up your galluses, spit on your hands and wade in. Keep him chasing you around from one lie to another until it makes his head swim."

"He ain't gwine to ketch *me.*"

"Look here, Mr. Adams"—Billy Marion tried to laugh, but couldn't—"let Uncle Zack alone, he's my witness—don't be putting notions into his head."

"All right, Billy—what are you going to do with your client? Hang him?"

Billy flinched. "I hope not, sir."

"Don't let 'em hang Zack; give him about ten years."

Zack kept grinning—white men who talked that way to him would stand a touch for a quarter. Zack set Mr. Adams down in his book.

It was a long pull and a strong pull to the top of Clay Street hill. Just before their heads showed over the crest Billy nudged Zack and they stopped.

Mr. Adams puffed on and crossed to the restaurant where Griscom and the colonel were chatting over their cigars.

"Good!" he exclaimed when he saw the colonel; "you are here. Are you going with me to the court-house and look over those deeds?"

"Don't tear your shirt, Adams; plenty time. Gris is going up after a while and we'll take it together."

Billy Marion and Zack had halted beyond the hill where they couldn't be seen from the restaurant. "Zack," he suggested, "you go around the other way. I don't want Mr. Griscom to see you coming up with me. He might suspect something. It is just as well not to let everybody know your business."

Zack shook his head determinedly. "He ain't gwine to git nuthin' out o' me; I ain't tellin' nuthin' to nobody what ain't on my side. I believes in he'pin' a young man out, an' keepin' yo' mouf shut."

"That's right; you keep out of sight and be at the court-house at four o'clock. Tell the truth about everything we did."

"Yas, suh; I never aims to tell nuthin' what ain't so—ef I makes no mistake."

Billy Marion hurried over to the restaurant, where he made the fourth at the table, and ordered a quick lunch.

"Well, Billy," Griscom observed; "Adams tells

me that you and Ole Reliable are putting up a job. Going to knock me out of the box, are you?"

Billy smiled and said nothing. Then Colonel Spottiswoode asked, "What became of Zack?"

"He went off somewhere."

The colonel whispered softly, "Whew! you lawyers are so infernally secretive"—and said no more about it.

Four o'clock came and the court reassembled. Billy Marion had no misgivings as he called Ole Reliable for his first witness. Respectably dressed and respectful in his manner, the old negro came around to the witness-stand with the air of one who knows exactly how to move among white folks. In a plain and straightforward way, Zack told about those spikes, effectively and truthfully as Billy himself could have done, using homely expressions and apt illustrations that relieved the somber tension. For the first time Billy saw a juror smile; Ole Reliable had made an excellent impression. He knew what he was talking about, and had told the truth; there was nothing to fear from the cross-examination. "Take the witness, Mr. Griscom." Billy leaned back contentedly in his chair.

Griscom pulled himself forward to the table. "Old man, what did you say your name is?"

"Zack Foster, suh, but everybody, white and black, calls me 'Ole Reliable.' "

"You work for Colonel Spottiswoode?"

"De bes' part o' my time I do, suh—an' de bes' time, suh." His reply brought a chuckle from the jury.

"How did you happen to go down there and examine those spikes so carefully?"

There was no danger in this question. Billy naturally supposed that Zack would say he had gone to the landing with Mr. Marion for the purpose of looking at those very spikes. But Zack remembered how Billy had held him back at the Clay Street corner and cautioned him not to let Mr. Griscom know their business; and Zack Foster was not the man to betray a friend.

"How come me to go down dar?" Zack sparred for time, and from long experience Griscom knew what was coming.

"That's what I asked—how did you happen to go down there?"

Zack's answer came without hesitation, clearly and candidly as he had answered all other questions: "I jes' happened to go down dere wid de cunnel—ef I makes no mistake."

"Colonel who?"

"Cunnel Spottiswoode."

Billy jerked himself straight and gripped his chair like a man having a tooth pulled; for the life of him he couldn't help glancing at Griscom.

Griscom stiffened up likewise, but more in the manner of a terrier who sees a rat; he glanced at Billy with the "sorry-for-you" expression.

Both of them knew that Zack was lying now, and each one saw that the other one knew it. It was up to Griscom to catch him, utterly to discredit him before the jury—and Griscom had a reputation.

The cold sweat stood out on Billy Marion's forehead and he nerved himself to watch the chase—with much the same hopeless spirit that a friend to the rabbit might watch bunny with a pack of dogs behind him in an open field, even the dodgings and the twistings giving no hope of ultimate escape.

Zack smiled blandly at the district attorney, who smiled back. Then they settled down face to face for a heart-to-heart talk. Ole Reliable sent assurance of comfort to the younger lawyer. Out of his twinkling eye came the message: "Don't worry, Mister Billy, I ain't gwine to tell nuthin' on *you*."

Griscom cleared the table in front of him, as a battleship strips her decks, shoved aside the water-pitcher, the ink-bottle and a pile of law-books. Billy knew what that meant. He sat and trembled while Zack smiled benignantly at them both.

Griscom began: "Now, Uncle Zack, when did you go down to the river with Colonel Spottiswoode?"

"To-day; dis very day."

"What time to-day?"

"Maybe 'bout dinner time or a little after—to be real sure. Colonel tole me to meet him at de Garden."

"And you met him there?"

"Yas suh; I always do what cunnel say."

"How did you happen to go down there with the colonel—you were just strolling about for your health?"

"No, suh; cunnel was 'spectin' some mules on dat steamboat. He say to me, 'Zack, you come 'long wid me, an' ef de mules arrives here, you kin jes' light in an' drive 'em home.' "

"Where were those mules coming from?"

"Saint Louey. Pair o' big black mules. Dat's what cunnel say; I don't like to say nuthin' 'cept what I knows."

"What boat were they expected on?"

"De *Carroll.*"

"You went down there with the colonel to see about some mules, and were not paying attention to spikes? You weren't studying about spikes, were you?"

"Yas suh, I wuz; we sho' paid p'tickler 'tention to dem spikes."

"Very well, why did you and the colonel pay such p'tickler attention to those spikes?"

"Well, Mister, it wuz dis-a-way; whilst we wuz

waitin' fer de boat, cunnel he set down on a ole barge, an' de argument riz up 'bout dese spikes. Cunnel 'lowed he wuz gwine to build a new gin house on Sherwood Plantation, and he say to me, jes' so, 'Zack, dese big nails would be de very thing fer dat gin house—I wonders ef I could git enough of 'em.' Den me an' him raised a 'spute 'bout how many spikes wuz dere. Cunnel, he reckons dere mus' be a thousand, an' I cas' my eyes over dat bunch, jes' so, an' I says jes' so, 'Cunnel, I got a good eye, an' I reckon, jes' by lookin' at 'em, dere tain't more'n 'bout nine hundred an' eighty at de mos'—ef I makes no mistake.' We argufied 'bout dat fer de longest, an' directly cunnel say, 'Dere's a way fer to fin' out, mighty quick. You count de spikes in one layer an' den count de number o' layers in a stack, an' den we'll know 'zactly how many's in de stack.' Atter dat we went trompin' up an' down de river bank countin' spikes."

With open mouth and staring eyes, Griscom listened through this lucid and convincing explanation. Billy Marion did likewise. He listened and he stared. Involuntarily the two lawyers turned to each other; involuntarily they smiled, like two Roman augurs meeting in the street. Billy heard the old lawyer mutter, "Don't that nigger beat hell!"

For several moments Griscom toyed with a strip of paper, tearing it into bits. Billy hoped against

hope that he was going to give up and quit. But Griscom wasn't a quitter; he arose and addressed the court: "Will your Honor indulge me for a moment, I wish to confer with a witness?" He hurried out of the court-room, down the stairs. Billy knew that he had gone down-stairs to talk with Colonel Spottiswoode and Mr. Adams, who were in the chancery clerk's office.

"It's all off," he thought; "I'd like to break that old fool's neck." He glared at Zack, who returned a sweetly sympathetic smile.

Griscom broke in upon Colonel Spottiswoode and Mr. Adams, who were comparing a deed. "Colonel, did you go with Zack Foster to the landing this morning to get some mules off the *Carroll?*"

"No; never could find the old rascal."

"Did you and Zack ever make any observations about those spikes on the river front?"

"I don't know what Zack did; I did not."

"Did you ever have any conversation with him about spikes at all?"

"Never thought of such a thing."

"Did you count any spikes on the river bank?"

"Never did; didn't know they were there."

"I'll need you for a witness. He's the champion long-distance liar of the world—and I'm bound to catch him or he'll ruin this case. By the way, Adams, you came up the hill with Billy Marion and

Zack. Don't you remember laughing about it in the Garden? You told Zack not to let me catch him in a lie—just keep me chasing him for one to another until he made my head swim. Well, he's doing it." And the district attorney rushed out of the room.

"Here, Griscom, here!" Adams shouted after him. "Wait a minute! don't mix me up in this mess. I can't afford to hang around the court-house for two or three days."

Griscom left the two men swearing at him, fluently and sincerely. He dashed through the hall, climbed the stairs three at a time and sent the sheriff for them before they could leave the court-house. "Tell 'em to get just as mad as they please, but don't let 'em get away. Keep them out of the court-room."

Griscom returned to his seat at the table, rolled up his sleeves and faced Ole Reliable again. "Uncle Zack, do you know Mr. Adams—Mr. Poindexter Adams?"

"Who? Dat young sandy-mustache gent'man what mends watches at de jewelry sto'?"

"No; tall gentleman, long gray beard. Boss man at the compress."

Ole Reliable began shaking his head.

"Don't you remember walking up the Clay Street hill with Mr. Poindexter Adams and Mr. William Marion? Didn't Mr. Adams tell you not to let me

catch you in a lie, just let me chase you from one to another until you made my head swim?"

"Lordee, Mister Griscom, you's done dribbled out a whole passel o' foolishness. I don't aim to say nuthin' 'cept jes' what I knows—ef I makes no mistake."

"Who have you been talking to about this case?"

"Nobody."

"Never talked to anybody, white or black?"

"No suh."

"Have you never talked to Mr. William Marion, that gentleman right there, attorney for the defendant?"

Ole Reliable gazed blankly at the defendant's counsel: "Is dat de gent'man you calls Mr. Marion? I been knowin' his favor a long time, but ain't never heerd his name."

Billy winced at this denial of their ancient friendship.

"Zack, look me straight in the face and look at the jury."

"Can't do dat boss; I ain't cross-eyed."

"Look at me then. Is it not a fact that you met Mr. William Marion on the corner of Clay and Washington Streets in front of the Garden Restaurant where he was talking with Mr. Henry Parker and while I was sitting there watching you? Didn't you two go down the hill together to the river bank,

where Mr. Marion called your attention to those spikes? Didn't you come back up the hill together, and didn't Mr. Adams join you—"

Ole Reliable kept shaking his head. "I don't walk none in my sleep, Mister Griscom; an' I ain't able to sleep none in de daytime. I don't see how dat could be—ef I makes no mistake."

"Mr. Clerk," called Griscom, "please issue a subpœna instanter for Mr. Henry Parker."

Griscom had started after Zack with a rapier—the keen white blade of knighthood—it being his long suit to make a witness angry, tangle him up and perforate him—gently, delicately, completely. Somehow or other the rapier could never find a joint in Ole Reliable's impenetrable armor.

Then Griscom substituted force for skill, and tried a meat ax. In half an hour of cajolery and brow-beating, Ole Reliable had drawn the redoubtable Griscom out of his chair, had him on his feet gesticulating, waving his hands and thrashing blindly with a club.

Zack leaned forward, innocent and amiable—meekly regretful that any gentleman should get so "het up."

The jury had long since lost sight of the case they were trying, and gave way to an unreserved enjoyment; it was a beautiful spectacle of good-natured ignorance defending itself from learning and wrath.

Billy Marion's sympathy had shifted from the rabbit—he felt sorry for the hounds.

Then the district attorney gave up. "That is all, your Honor." Griscom spoke with his head down.

Quick as a flash Billy Marion let well enough alone and motioned the witness to "stand aside." He felt limp and draggled when the protracted strain was over.

"One moment, please," remarked Griscom—he had another gun to fire. "Your Honor, I feel it my duty to ask that this man be held for perjury—"

Billy Marion bounded up and lifted his hand, "Your Honor! let the jury be retired."

The two men faced each other like frozen images, while twelve jurors filed out and the door closed behind them.

Zack regarded the whole proceeding with benevolent complacency, beaming impartially upon everybody.

"I will hear Mr. Griscom," said the judge.

Griscom spoke rapidly and with considerable heat: "Your Honor, I want this negro held until Colonel Spottiswoode and Mr. Poindexter Adams can appear before the grand jury. They are both in the courthouse and their testimony will indict him for perjury. I shall also use them as witnesses to impeach him in this case. Will your Honor hear their statements?"

Billy Marion interposed—respectfully, earnestly. "The district attorney is too experienced a lawyer, and too good a lawyer, not to know better. I am free to admit that this testimony has been a surprise to me. But let us look at the law. Your Honor would not permit the district attorney to introduce Mr. Adams and Colonel Spottiswoode to contradict this witness, because they would impeach him upon an immaterial point. It makes no difference whether this witness went to the river bank with Colonel Spottiswoode or myself—the material point is whether *those spikes are there* as he described them—"

Judge Meredith nodded to indicate that he agreed with Mr. Marion, and opened a code: "Mr. Griscom, you are familiar with the statute. 'Every person who shall wilfully and corruptly swear, testify or affirm falsely to any *material* matter,' and so forth. To constitute the crime of perjury the false statement must be material to the issue involved."

The district attorney surrendered. He took his seat and remarked sullenly: "Your Honor has anticipated me. Let the witness stand aside."

Ole Reliable had already started to leave the witness-stand when Billy Marion thought of something. "One moment, your Honor. I suggest that you have the jury brought in. The charge of perjury against this witness has been made in their presence.

"Me an' yo' pa was good friends"

If they come back and do not see the witness they might naturally suppose he had been taken into custody by the sheriff. That would greatly prejudice our case."

"Quite right, Mr. Marion. Bring in the jury, Mr. Sheriff."

Griscom turned his back while the jury filed in and took their seats in the box. He did not lift his head as Billy Marion remarked pleasantly to the witness, "Stand aside, Ole Reliable; I thank you very much."

Court officers and attorneys seemed to feel relieved. They had reached a breathing point. The court was practically at ease while they moved freely about the room. Griscom rose disgustedly and stretched his long legs. The jury smiled at him. Secretly they enjoyed the unequal tilt in which a shrewd lawyer had been worsted. Jurors are human beings, and they sympathize with the under dog.

"Do you know," Griscom muttered to a deputy sheriff, "that old fool has beat me out of a verdict? The defense has started off with a hurrah. I can't convict anybody before a jury with the giggles." In which he was eminently correct.

Billy Marion felt like a man who had been first reprieved, and then pardoned. He walked to the iron rail which, like a levee, held out an overflow of black faces. Ole Reliable left the witness-stand and

moved reluctantly through the crowd, ostentatiously speaking to every gentleman he knew. He had been the star performer, and would gladly have responded to an encore. At the gate he stopped and whispered to Billy: "Done fine, didn't I, Mister Billy? Is you got a seegar about yo' clo'es?"

Mechanically Billy handed him the smoke. Zack put his ear close and whispered again: "I tole you I warn't gwine to tell nuthin' 'cept what I knowed, an' I warn't gwine to mix you up in no nigger law-suit, neither. Me an' yo' pa was good friends, an' I believes in he'pin' a young man along."

CHAPTER VIII

HE MEETS A NEW FRIEND, SHOVES THE QUEER AND MAKES HIS GETAWAY

THROUGHOUT the holidays Zack lived high, revelling in his complete reinstatement with Colonel Spottiswoode.

The cordial Christmas weather lingered on and genial sunshine warmed the battle hills of Vicksburg. Balmy December held over into January, and Ole Reliable carried a Christmas holdover into the new year, a balance brought forward from that bachelor dinner at the colonel's.

Evening came on, the hour for rumination, resolutions and the turning of new leaves. Zack sat impenitently at his hearth, smoking a clay pipe and shedding Selina's personal remarks as a duck's back gutters off a drizzle. Her scathing denunciations never touched him—didn't turn a single hair of the kinky hedge that skirted his bald knob. During those intervals when Selina floundered for a word, Elder Moss leaned forward and supplied a scriptural admonition suited to the sanctimony of his coat.

Ole Reliable said nothing—kept on saying nothing

in a most exasperating tone. No political boss ever smiled more leniently upon a brace of muckrakers.

"Zack! Whyn't you speak up?" demanded Selina.

Zack untangled a foot from underneath his chair. "Ef I don't say nuthin' maybe you an' de elder mought shet up atter while, 'cause you won't have nuthin' to argue."

"Warn't you drunk when you come home?"

"No, I warn't—jes' tol'able well organized." Zack beamed reminiscently; upbraiding couldn't rob him of a cheerful Christmas.

Selina gave her chair a vicious jerk. "'Tain't no use, Elder; Zack puts me in mind o' dat time when Drif et up de cunnel's roast pig. He licked his chops whilst Zack was beatin' him, 'cause Zack couldn't beat de pig outen him."

"Yes," observed Zack, "Drif's jes' like a nigger—give him a inch an' he'll take hell."

Blam! blam! blam! Somebody knocked on the kitchen door.

"Uncle Zack! Uncle Zack!"

Zack ran to open it and a pop-eyed negro boy gasped out, "White man rid up to our house jes' now lookin' fer you. Pa say he's a constable."

Ole Reliable promptly slammed the door and faced Selina.

"Zack, what rascality is you been doin' now?"

"Ain't been doin' nuthin'."

"Dat's yo' reg'lar job—doin' nuthin'." Selina withered him with suspicion.

"Huh!" volunteered the elder, "he don't know what he is been doin'."

"Dat don't signify," retorted Zack. "Look yonder." He pointed through the window, and the three of them peeped out together.

A rawboned white man on a stocking-foot sorrel had stopped at Jim Bowman's fence. Jim was Zack's next-door enemy ever since Drif killed the next-door dog. Anxiety choked Ole Reliable's throat, but Jim appeared to be acting the perfect gentleman. He kept shaking his head at the white man's inquiry, which was loyal of Jim—considering.

"Dat's Foxy Hoskins," Zack whispered. "Used to be dep'ty; he don't know nuthin' on me."

Hoskins rode on and dismounted at Zack's gate. "Go out an' see what he wants," suggested Selina.

"Not me; constables don't chase a nigger fer to give him a ripe peach. You go talk to him."

Hoskins knocked; Zack dissolved into the kitchen and closed the door all but a crack, while Seliny met the visitor.

"Good evening," began the man.

"Good evenin'," responded Selina.

"Do you know a colored man named Zack Foster? They told me he lived somewhere near a big cottonwood tree."

Selina tried hard to think. "Zack Foster? Zack Foster? Oh, yes; he's a young bright-skinned yaller feller? Works on a steamboat?"

Foxy Hoskins shook his head, "That ain't the man; this one calls himself 'Ole Reliable.' "

Selina passed him on with a helpful suggestion: "Maybe he lives on de nex' block; lot o' new people stays down dere."

As Hoskins turned to go he called back over his shoulder, "Colonel Spottiswoode sent me to find him right away; Colonel wants him to go down to Gatesville and get some labor."

There was an undecided shuffle in the kitchen, but cautious old Zack did not disclose himself until Selina shut the front door. Selina made another suggestion: "Hadn't you better ax dat man what de cunnel wants?"

Zack shook his head. "Constables is mighty slick; I'll go up an' ax de cunnel."

Early and provident fear being the mother of safety, Zack scaled his back fence and circled around to Colonel Spottiswoode's. The sorrel stood hitched at the post. So Zack made his arrival from the rear and halted behind the stable. Then he passed through the stable, slipped around the chicken-coop and dodged across to the servants' house so briefly that he made Aunt Abby lose a flea.

"Dar you is! Dar you is! Cunnel is been huntin'

high an' low, cussin' 'cause he couldn't find hide nor hair o' you."

With this exhilarating information Zack kept traveling straight to the house, yea, to the very front gallery thereof, and demonstrated himself before the colonel's window, the which roused a shout from within.

"Here you! Zack! Come here."

"Comin', suh."

With his flowered dressing-gown and slippers Colonel Spottiswoode sat deep in his chair among a scatteration of newspapers and magazines. Zack resented the constable, sitting cross-legged in a rocker smoking one of the colonel's best cigars. He jabbed at the fire and waited for the colonel to vouchsafe.

"Sit down, Zack; I want to talk to you a while." Zack eased himself to the edge of a straight chair.

"Zack, didn't you use to live near Gatesville?"

"Yas suh; 'bout fo' miles out, on Jedge Foster's place."

"You know the people in that neighborhood?"

"Yas suh; I knows all de fust-class folks—an' niggers."

"Those people are having trouble about the boll-weevil. The planters won't be able to furnish their tenants this year, and the negroes have got to move. I want to get about forty or fifty new families and

put them on Sherwood Plantation. Can you go down and get them?"

"Shucks, Cunnel, ef dem niggers 'spicions you wants 'em dey'll block de big road in a scramble."

The colonel smiled. "Now, Zack, listen to me. I won't take a tenant without the landlord's consent. You are not to run off a single negro."

"Sholy, sholy; us couldn't do no sech po-white-trash trick as dat."

The colonel reached over to his table and picked up three letters already written. "Here is a letter to Mr. Webster, cashier of the Gates County Bank. Do you know him?"

"Ef dat's little Jimmy Webster I knows him. His pa used to be Doctor Webster what lived at Magnolia Plantation?"

"He's the man."

"Know 'im! I raised dat boy since he warn't no taller'n my finger. Spec' he's got right big fer his size by now."

"Present this letter to him at the bank. He'll tell you what to do. Here is a letter for Mr. Lawrence, six miles from town on the Farmer's Ferry Road."

"Yas suh; I knows every step o' dat road, shore do. He lives right at de brink o' dat red hill jes' 'cross a bridge; water-oak tree on de lef'-han' side."

"Mr. Lawrence is not planting Homewood this year. Most of his tenants will have to move. Go

to him, and if he is willing you can talk to his negroes about moving to Sherwood."

"Sholy, sholy; we might jes' as well git 'em."

"But you must see Mr. Lawrence first, you understand?"

"Yas suh; yas suh; co'se I wouldn't do nuthin' widout axin' Mr. Lawrence."

"Then you will call on Mr. Green, of Tower Hill, with this letter. He wrote me that there are about a dozen families on his place that he can not take care of another year, and asked me if I wanted them."

Zack wrapped the letters in a piece of newspaper and put them in his pocket.

"When you round up a gang go back to Mr. Webster and tell him how many people you have; then Mr. Hoskins will come down and ship their things to Sherwood."

The colonel arose. "Now, Zack, you know how these labor agents slip around at night among the negroes, stirring them up, running off tenants and leaving their cotton unpicked in the field. If those people catch you doing that, why—you'd be lucky if you ever got to jail." In order to make sure the colonel repeated every detail of his instructions. "Now, Zack, you understand?"

"Yas suh; I knows you wouldn't stand fer nobody goin' on Sherwood an' meddlin' wid yo' nig-

gers." Zack assented all the more joyfully when the colonel began feeling in his pocket.

"Here is twenty-five dollars in small change. You may have to buy little things for the negroes, pay for hauling, spend a few dollars to get them in a good humor. Remember to wear your best clothes and look prosperous."

Zack hesitated before he went out the door. "Cunnel, it jes' fell in my mind to ax you one mo' thing—what's dis here boll-weevil dat's got de niggers so skeered?"

"It's a beetle, a sort of bug that eats the cotton."

Zack looked up doubtfully, "Now, Cunnel, don't be a-foolin' me! A bug? Huh! I 'lowed de boll-weevil war somethin' like dat tariff what romps round de country bluffin' everybody."

Next morning, when the south-bound passenger train pulled out of Vicksburg, Ole Reliable was half aboard; his other half hung out of the window, waving a derby. "Good-by, everybody; ef I don't see you no mo' de ole bline mule is yourn." He had a long cigar in his mouth; several others peeped out of his vest. He stacked his paper imitation of an alligator leather valise on the seat in front of him. Then he lolled back with his feet on the cushions, spread his coat and exhibited his secret-society badges. Every time the train whistled Zack threw up the window

and stuck out his head. "Good-by, niggers; I'm gwine to Gatesville." One seat pent him up; he changed frequently and drained the water-cooler. He paced the aisle with one hand in his pocket and the rattle of silver followed him. But the other passengers refused to respond. Failing to rouse a proper enthusiasm he sat down and squirmed.

Zack had never read *Sandy MacPherson,* but he found himself, like Tammas Carlyle, playing for the applause of one who at first regarded him with indifference. Across the aisle sat an intensely black man in fervid trousers and dilettante vest. Zack took particular notice of a silk-lined tan overcoat carelessly displayed across the seat. For traveling he wore a golf cap, while a cream-colored felt creation reposed in the rack. This glittering member of his race looked persistently out of the window when Zack paraded past. But whenever he turned his head the stranger eyed him keenly.

Having taken Ole Reliable's measure, the stranger opened a small satchel, and selected a badge that matched one of Zack's. He fastened this to his lapel and presently shifted his position so that Zack could see it. Zack rose to the bait like a trout, moved across the aisle and sat down beside his newfound brother. Mystic signs and grips passed between them; then Zack began to tell Brother Singleterry the story of his life, with embellishments.

"O' co'se my real name is Foster—Corp'r'l Zack Foster—but everybody, white and black, calls me Ole Reliable."

"*Mister* Foster is the best; our race should drop those old-time negro names."

"Sholy, sholy; but nobody don't pay no 'tention to cunnel; he's de main one what calls me dat. Cunnel thinks a heap o' me—jes' look at dese letters he gimme to de bank to git money."

"Great compliment," Brother Singleterry remarked, reading the letters as a great favor to Zack; "I am a banker myself." And he said it without raising his voice so that the other negroes in the car could hear him.

Zack was forced to ask questions—Brother Singleterry being that modest—before he discovered that he was actually sitting beside the Honorable J. Webb Singleterry, cashier of the Liberator Savings Bank, of Cincinnati, president of the Knights and Ladies of David.

This awed Zack into silence; he listened while the other chatted affably about the uplift of the colored race. "They needs to quit bein' so 'spicious of each other. They got to stand side an' side, an' stop pulling every which way."

"Ain't dat de troof!" Zack hoisted one of his big feet to the seat beside Singleterry's, then jerked it down because of the ponderous comparison with

patent leathers. By a happy coincidence Singleterry had business in Gatesville, and remarked that they would travel together if he were not intruding. Zack waved his hand in courteous protest at the bare idea of intrusion; then he smiled to think of the figure they would cut, parading up the street in Gatesville, and how the other negroes would ask, "Who's dat?"

Just before the train reached Gatesville in the afternoon Brother Singleterry began to show a mild nervousness. He led Brother Foster to the front platform on the off side. "We will disembark here," he said. "If these people knew it was me they would bring out the band. I wants to go quiet like a citizen."

"Yes, I hates a band—I sho' do." Zack glanced around with a sneaking hope that his objections to a band might be overruled. The train stopped. Brother Singleterry dodged across the platform and dived into a hack. Ole Reliable climbed in behind him and Brother Singleterry whispered something to the hackman. It was disappointing to drive up a side street instead of having a parade, but Brother Singleterry paid the fare and Brother Foster could not complain.

"I got important business at court," Brother Singleterry explained. "'Twon't do for me to show up too soon. You better keep dark until you see how de

cat is goin' to hop." Zack, being a full-fledged labor agent, considered this very good advice.

"Shore," he responded, the monosyllable marking him as a man of reticence.

Brother Singleterry knew exactly where he was going. They stopped at a negro boarding-house, a tumble-down frame, which had once been a store. He did not tarry on the sidewalk, but pulled open the door and went straight up-stairs, where a slovenly negro woman showed them into a room. Brother Singleterry went at once to the window and looked out. It commanded a view of both streets. He threw himself across one of the thin-looking beds. "Travelin' makes me tired. I'm goin' to take a nap."

"All right," said Zack. "I reckon I'll go walk about some. I ain't been in dis town sence de war."

Singleterry leaned on his elbow. "Ef I was in *yo'* business I wouldn't show up too strong, 'specially 'mong white folks. Our race is O. K.; they won't say nuthin'; white folks blabs everything they knows."

"Amen to dat; you spoke a parable."

"We are going to have supper in dis room; don't miss it." Which showed that he did not know Ole Reliable.

Zack glanced at his clothes before going out on the street. The coat and vest had been a trifle tight

for Colonel Spottiswoode, but looked fine on Zack. He had excellent trousers, his derby was all right, but the overcoat was somewhat frazzled.

"Gittin' hot outdoors, ain't it?" he remarked, and laid the coat in the corner. As Zack passed out of the door he ran his hand across the silk-lined tan beauty hanging on a chairback.

Brother Singleterry continued to smile until Zack reached the bottom of the creaking stairs. Then he sprang up and carefully drew aside the tattered curtain. Ole Reliable stopped in the middle of the street and seemed confused. Singleterry saw him call a boy and ask some question. Then he trudged aimlessly around the corner.

Singleterry shook his head dubiously. "Guess I ought to pick that chicken before somebody else gits a chance."

With that Singleterry turned his talents to Zack's valise. It had the kind of a lock that opened with a corkscrew, hairpin, pocketknife, toothpick or thumbnail. But Singleterry carried something better than any of these for locks. With a professional glance at Ole Reliable's belongings he shut up the valise more quickly than he opened it. Zack's overcoat came next—nothing of consequence except the letter to "Mr. J. L. Webster, Cashier." Singleterry read this letter again, very carefully, then considered: "Mr. Webster don't know Zack Foster, and

it's a cinch he won't know me. Nothing like trying." Putting on Zack's overcoat and a less conspicuous hat, Singleterry sallied out.

It must have been a short horse and soon curried, for Singleterry came back swearing and smiling. "Oughter hit him fer a hundred; twenty-five bones hardly pays me for my time. Wouldn't take it if I didn't have to hustle out of this town so quick."

Having provided himself with pin-money, Singleterry prepared for the serious purpose of his visit. First he locked the door. Out of his gripsack he took a small satchel. From this he laid a package of bank-notes on the table—all twenties and absolutely new. These he divided into separate packages of ten, fifteen and twenty-five, and put them in his inside vest pocket. Three or four loose bills he stuffed carelessly into his trousers. Then he put away his satchel and unlocked the door.

When Zack returned it had grown dark; a kerosene lamp was burning on the washstand and preparations for supper were in progress.

"Huh, Brother Singleterry, dat looks good to me," he remarked, surveying a table set with plates, black-handled knives and forks, heavy cups without handles and a checkerboard cloth.

Brother Singleterry reposed in a thick shadow on the thin bed. "Hello, Brother Foster, I ordered

beefsteak and onions, coffee and battercakes; how does they hit you?"

"Dat's jes' what I gits when I goes travelin'." Ole Reliable sat down gloomily on a tin trunk in the corner. "Brother Singleterry, comin' back to de ole town ain't what I 'spected. 'Tain't nuthin' like what it used to be. All dem little frame stores settin' side an' side, dey's gone. De drug sto' is gone. 'Tain't no benches roun' de grocery, whar folks kin set down an' whittle. Neber did see but one ole frien'—Harvey Skidmore; he lives on Homewood Plantation."

Ole Reliable rambled on, half to himself. "Nigger people down here is havin' mighty hard times. Never made no crop las' year, an' a heap of 'em ain't gwine to try fer a crop dis year. Don't know how dey's goin' to git sumpin' to eat."

"That's where you step in wid yo' graft," winked Brother Singleterry; "you ought to get at least five dollars a family for moving hands."

"Dat's de reg'lar price, but I'm gittin' dese han's fer de cunnel; he'll 'low me what's right."

"Stick him for all you kin. You're a hard worker, and you mustn't let somebody else get the gravy. Five dollars a family, forty families, comes to two hundred dollars—easy money. You old befo'-de-wah niggers makes me tired."

Ole Reliable stared at the broken-mouthed pitcher on the table; loneliness and disappointment struck deep into his simple soul.

Brother Singleterry sat up in bed, and took a flask out of his pocket. "A little wine for thy stummick's sake. Brace up—take a drink."

Zack demurred a little to the first invitation, less to the second, and anticipated the third. His eyes sparkled and he began to talk a blue streak. "Gwine to git out o' dis town right away. Ole man Harvey would a tuk me on his wagon, but he's skeered, bein' as I'm a labor agent. He say fer me to come out to six-mile bridge an' holler, an' he kin hear me to his house. I reckin dey ain't built dese slick sidewalks in de cotton-patches, an' put 'lectric lights on de fenceposts, so I won't know de ole plantations. I reckin dey ain't tore down the hills and dug hollers —I wants to see sumpin' I knows."

Brother Foster kept talking and Brother Singleterry kept watching him until the woman brought their supper. She sniffed in disgust at two negroes putting on airs. The slattern moved in slow jerks like a mechanical toy that is about to run down. Singleterry tossed a dime on the table. "Now, you go outside and stay; don't let nobody bother us." The woman backed out and left the door imperceptibly ajar.

"Shut that door!" It slammed viciously. Single-

terry took the chair which had his overcoat across the back and set it against the door.

"What fer you doin' dat?" asked Zack.

"That woman—she looks through the keyhole. Pull up yo' chair and help eat this expense account; the company pays for it."

With three stiff drinks behind him and the smell of steak and onions ahead Ole Reliable was not backward in drawing forward.

" 'Spense 'count? What's dat?"

His host paused in the act of cutting the beefsteak. "When you gits to travelin' you'll find out—expense is everything from beefsteaks to—to—tan overcoats. Hand yo' plate."

Zack might have puzzled over this, but his plate came back with such a load of steak and onions that he couldn't put his mind on theories.

Presently Brother Singleterry laid down his knife and dropped into a brown study. "A notion jes' hit me, Brother Foster," he observed. "You seem to got influence among the old members of our race. Of course we got to pay a big salary and expense—you would have to travel. Now, if we could jes' get you to be state organizer for the Knights and Ladies of David?"

Ole Reliable grabbed his breath to keep it from leaving him—big salary, expenses, rides on railroads, free ice-water—the accumulated glories hit

him in a bunch. Brother Singleterry leaned forward anxiously and added, "Of course you would get a percentage on the new members."

"P'centage?" Zack gasped.

"Influential men like you must be well paid."

"Dat's so—I got to be paid."

"You needn't worry about your regalia to wear in the parades—company pays for all that. We couldn't expect you to pay for such a fine one, being as you ride all alone by yourself in the first hack."

Ole Reliable sat dumb, overwhelmed by the gorgeous bunch of language that Brother Singleterry released upon him.

He floated in a dreamland of red velvet and spangles, expenses and salary. Brother Singleterry kept on talking while he got up and felt in all his pockets, including the overcoat. "Ain't dat a pretty howdy-do, invitin' a gent'man to dinner an' got no seegars?" He laughed contemptuously. "An' not a cent o' change less dan a ten." And, laughing, he dropped down on the bed which was in the shadow.

"I got money aplenty," Zack suggested eagerly. "Lemme buy de seegars." He dug down in his jeans and brought out a fistful of silver.

The other negro waved his hand airily. "Dat ain't de way *we* do it; some companies is cheap screws about seegars. Expense account, that's the thing. Gimme change for this ten."

Zack shoveled out a handful of silver, halves and quarters, and laid them on the table. Brother Singleterry raised up on the edge of the bed, beyond the radius of light, and flung a crumpled bill to Zack. Then he leaned over and began lacing his shoe.

Ole Reliable prudently examined the bill, this being a considerable transaction in finance. It was brand-new, crisp and crinkly, and—he looked again —of the twenty-plunk variety. Ole Reliable held it up to the light, examined both sides and then turned to the man on the bed. "Brother Singleterry, ain't you made a mistake about dis money?"

Singleterry went on lacing his shoe. "I *never* makes mistakes. If I does my company stands by 'em. They would rather pay fer it than to have them niggers think I makes mistakes—hurts business, you know. Everything goes in the expense account—it don't belong to nobody."

Zack was in doubt, so he took the trick. He transferred the bill to his pocket and handed over the change. Singleterry saw that this left a pile of silver on the table, so he pulled out a mate to the first bill: "Better give me change for another ten. You won't be spendin nuthin' while you is with me. I likes to have plenty o' chicken-feed in my pocket. Don't it pester you to stand around in a store while the clerk is fooling wid the cash drawer?"

"Sho' do," assented Zack.

A second twenty followed the first into Zack's pocket. It made him dizzy. A second ten—in silver —was dumped into Brother Singleterry's satchel. Each negro had struck a gold mine, and choked to keep from laughing in the other's face. Twenty dollars in two minutes—Zack wanted to get out of the room, into the fresh air.

"Now, then," Brother Singleterry continued amiably, "we'll smoke seegars if it takes the hair off."

"All right, I'll go git 'em; it's my treat."

Zack broke for the door, but Singleterry cut him off. "Not this day; it ain't yo' treat. I couldn't afford to let my company ketch you spendin' a nickel; they would fire me hot off the bat if I warn't the president. Bein' the president, I reckin they'd jes' set around and look grumpy."

Zack hated to think of such a nice company settin' around lookin' grumpy, so he stopped. Brother Singleterry laid one hand upon his shoulder, and with the other pressed the third twenty into his palm. "Sposin' we compromise? You go to that first drug store on the right-hand side—got a big soda fountain at the door—red-headed boy—you can't miss it; but don't make no mistake. Buy fo' bits' worth o' Gray Eagle seegars, give him this twenty and bring me the change. Don't stop nowhere."

Ole Reliable had a swimming in the head. Luck was coming his way in automobiles—money, din-

ners and cigars—thicker'n fleas on a fat pup. He cocked his hat to one side and stamped down the steps.

The minute Zack passed out of that door Singleterry's manner changed. Keen as a hound on a trail, he listened to the creaking of the stairs and heavy footfalls on the sidewalk. Then he crept out noiselessly and followed, keeping well in the shadows. The counterfeiter had selected this particular drug store because the fountain was far in front, away from the proprietor, and that red-headed boy had a slap-dash manner of making change.

Zack walked straight on to the drug store and spoke politely to the red-headed boy. "Good evenin', Mister; please suh, lemme have fo' bits wuth o' Gray Eagle seegars."

"Ten cents each," announced the boy, as if that settled it. "Oh, you are buying them for somebody." And he handed out the box.

Singleterry stopped outside. "He's a good one, all right. If I had *his* face and my sense I could make a killin'."

Singleterry kept one eye on the youngster in front, the other on a second man at the office desk in the rear. The man at the desk was very busy, and thirty feet away. These were mere details, but it was Singleterry's business to observe details. Zack was selecting one by one the cigars that he seemed to

want. Then he produced the twenty-dollar bill. The red-headed boy merely glanced at it, for the bill was a really excellent counterfeit. He opened the cash register and began fumbling. "Haven't got that much change. Wait a minute." And he started back to the desk with the bill in his hand. Singleterry moved closer to the window, where he had a clear view. This was the crucial moment. The man at the desk took the bill and opened the safe. He counted the change very rapidly—four fives, Singleterry thought. Then he looked at the bill—examined it closely. Red-head and the boss whispered together; both of them looked keenly at Ole Reliable, who had lost himself in the contemplation of a perfumery case. Singleterry wished he could hear what those two men were saying at the desk.

The boss nodded toward Zack and whispered to Red-head, then hurried out of the store with the bill in his hand. Red-head strolled between the counters and engaged Ole Reliable in conversation. He was visibly excited. This didn't look good to Singleterry—it being the usual preliminary to a striped suit.

Just as soon as the boss got out of sight he started down the street on a half run. "Too much hurry for change," thought Singleterry, so he passed by the door, caught Ole Reliable's eye and beckoned violently.

"All right," Zack answered loudly; "jes' as soon as I git my change."

"What do you think o' that for a fool?" said Singleterry to himself. Being a man of resource he always carried a trick or two up his sleeve. One of them came out instantly, for he stepped back to the door and yelled, "Fire! Fire!"—not loud enough to draw a crowd, but they could hear it in the store.

Neck-and-neck Red-head and Zack struck the sidewalk. Singleterry grabbed Zack's arm. "Fat's in the fire; run back to the room," said he.

"Lemme get my change."

"Never mind the change; they's fixin' to arrest you for a labor agent. Ten years in the pen." Singleterry jerked Ole Reliable into one end of the alley, then outran him to the other. But he had nothing to brag of when he reached their room, for Zack burst in immediately behind him. Singleterry carefully secured his own satchel, but he put on Zack's overcoat. "Look here, fool," he said; "grab your duds and hit de big road; bust it wide open. Country's the place for country niggers. It's better than the pentenchery—but not much."

"Pentenchery!" Zack repeated. "Hold on, man; gimme my overcoat."

For answer Singleterry snatched Zack's hat off his head, dropped his own soft felt hat, and played Israel Putnam going down the steps.

For a moment Zack stood dazed, then his foot itched for the road. With Singleterry's hat and coat, and his own valise, he dived down the narrow steps. The chambermaid grabbed him. "Lemme go; lemme go!" He tore loose from the woman, who followed him into the street, shouting some triviality about a board-bill.

When the ten-thirty train slowed down at Gatesville two strange men jumped off, sprang into a hack and yelled to the driver, "Sheriff's office."

The lights were still burning; the sheriff was rereading advertisements, shipping news, society column, everything in a New Orleans paper, trying to keep awake. The two men ran in. "You're the sheriff?"

"Yes, sir; Saunders is my name."

"This is Mr. McCullough. My name is Reid. Did you get our man?"

"Sit down, gentlemen. Your telegram came late in the afternoon and we were trying to locate your negro when somebody shoved a queer twenty on the druggist. But the negro does not answer the description of your man."

"Where is the druggist?" demanded Reid, a thin-faced ferret who did the talking. McCullough never opened his mouth.

Saunders stepped to the telephone and held a brief

conversation. Hanging up the receiver he said, "He will be here in five minutes."

The druggist and Red-head had scarcely got inside of the sheriff's door before Reid began asking questions, quick, sharp, incisive questions that elicited information. Neither of them could describe the man. "He was just a common old negro—nothing about him to notice."

"Mac, who do you think that could be?"

McCullough shook his head.

"What about the other man?"

"I did not see him," answered the druggist. And they turned to Red-head.

"The only things I noticed were a tan overcoat and a soft hat."

"That's him; that's him."

"He passed our door and hollered 'Fire.' That drew my attention until they both got away."

Reid laughed. "That cinches it. Dressy Jack has turned that trick a dozen times."

Reid took from his pocket a circular headed, "Five hundred dollars' reward," with a wood cut of Singleterry. "Look at this picture, sonny."

The lad shook his head doubtfully. "I'm not sure; I could not see him very well."

"The tan overcoat is enough," remarked Reid, turning to his partner. "Mac, what's your guess about the other negro?"

"Can't place him. Let him go. Jack's the one we're after."

"We'll land him all right," the sheriff assured them; "every train and steamboat and road is being watched."

Before they had finished planning their search one of the sheriff's deputies entered. He stood and listened. Presently somebody mentioned the tan overcoat. The young man stepped forward instantly. "Maybe that's the negro I met on six-mile bridge about nine-thirty. Just before I struck the bridge I heard a man holler—a loud whoop. He must have been calling Harvey Skidmore, who lives up on that hill. When I rode on the bridge he spoke up quick: 'Harvey? Dat you?' I stopped and got a match; while I was lighting my cigarette I could see that he had on a light-colored overcoat and a soft hat. A valise was lying at his feet."

Both the detectives got up. "Mr. Saunders, can you spare us a man who knows the country?"

"Sure."

"Come on, Mac; we've followed that tan overcoat too far to let it get away."

CHAPTER IX

HE PLAYS A LONE HAND, DISCARDS A TAN OVERCOAT AND DRAWS A FRIZZLY WIG

A LONE figure split the night and whizzed along the Farmer's Ferry Road with his face to the open country. In one hand Ole Reliable carried a broad-brimmed hat, in the other a light valise; the tails of his tan overcoat flapped between the two. He ran as if he were stepping ditches. Whenever he struck a mud hole he wished the moon would shine; whenever he heard somebody coming he dodged into the woods, and thanked God for shadows.

At the top of the hill Zack looked backward to the last sentinel light on the picket-line of Gatesville. Beyond that lay innumerable others, glaring, winking and blinking. It seemed to Zack that he had passed them all. Every one of them had shone into his face and pointed to him as he ran. But the lights were hitched and Zack wasn't.

Zack looked cautiously around him; the hills were thickly wooded and the night intensely dark. He

felt safe enough to sit down, take out his handkerchief and wipe away the honest sweat. "Huh! Dis sho' is one hot night in Jinuwerry."

Then he began to spell over the situation, aloud. Zack talked to himself for two reasons: first, he loved to hear a good speaker, and, second, he appreciated an intelligent audience.

"Brother Singleterry sho' is spry. Dat chambermaid hadn't oughter grabbed me fer his board-bill. Dat's how come Singleterry got de head start."

But there was balm in Gilead. Ole Reliable felt the thrill of two crisp twenties and began to chuckle. The new hat pleased him and the tan overcoat tickled him into a laugh that startled the echoes. "I sho' did out-swap Singleterry in dat trade—an' twenty dollars to boot. He's a easy mark."

It never crossed his mind that he carried counterfeit money, and that the tan overcoat was a penitentiary bell hanging around his neck.

He saw a white man come riding rapidly out of town. Zack merged into the blackness and let him pass. "I knows a whole family in Georgia what makes a livin' tendin' to deir own bizness. Mebbe he was atter me. Dese white folks sho' do make a miration 'bout 'ticin' labor. Ef Singleterry hadn't put me on to dat I mout have got in jail an' de Cunnel wouldn't git no hands. Dat wouldn't suit him—me neither."

Zack took up his valise and hustled. The lights behind him had no allurements; darkness ahead suited his taste.

He walked on, looking wistfully for some remembered landmark along a once familiar way. At every light he paused and tried to make out whose house it was. There were many new houses, interlopers that had no place in his boyhood's memory. Joy came only when he caressed the silky overcoat, and the shine of his eyes lighted the path before him. The highway dipped gradually into a valley, curving and widening into a leisurely stretch of yellow through a sea of ink. The trees almost met above him; he could see a streak of sky and the stars. This was Sandy Bottom where he used to walk his team because of the cooling shade. Zack stopped and leaned over a fence that inclosed the cedar grove—all just as he remembered it. Memory could trace the outlines of a little church. "Jinkins Chapel! Major Dean lives right over yander; dat way is Doctor Elmore's, an'—" Putting out his hand he touched a cold shaft of marble that stood beside the fence in the burying-ground where long-dead Elmores lay. This electrified him into a sudden spurt of speed. Like a man in a skiff, he went forward and looked back. Two hundred yards away he set down the valise and wiped his face. "Ain't dat hard luck! De onliest place what I knows is whar I don't

want to come nigh." After that Zack paid strict attention to walking.

Six-mile Bridge was new, but the creek was old. He recognized the hills and the big water-oak tree. This being his meeting-place with old man Harvey Skidmore, Zack relieved his feelings in a shout: "Harvey! Harvey!" A horse and man appeared. The horse's hoofs struck the bridge before Zack saw him. "Dat you, Harvey?" he asked.

"No," the man answered—he was a white man. Zack snatched up his valise and got ready to run when the man asked him, "Got a match?" The young man struck the match and lit his cigarette; then thanked him and rode on. Another figure came down a brushy path on the left.

"Who dat you was talkin' to?" Harvey inquired cautiously.

"Dunno; he jes' passed along de road an' axed me fer a match."

"Don't you be talkin' so free wid strangers; dey's raisin' a rookus in dis neighborhood 'bout labor agents."

Events had moved so swiftly that Zack had little to say as he followed Harvey up to the summit of the knoll. There was no cow, no mules, no sign of a domestic animal around the place. A few disconnected posts showed where a fence had been and disappeared.

Two grimy panes of glass, one in each sash, let out a flicker of light. The other panes were broken and the holes stuffed with rags. For a few feet around his cheerless cabin the grass had worn bald —a little bleaker, more barren than elsewhere. The presence of man had destroyed, but had not built; and this was all that marked the proximity of a human habitation. Harvey opened the door and motioned Zack to enter. A young black woman rose from beside the fire. Her voluminous wig betrayed certain aspirations that poverty had crushed.

"Kate, this is him. Us is old friends."

"Glad to git 'quainted." Kate welcomed Ole Reliable without enthusiasm or protest.

Zack sat down. He said nothing; Kate said nothing; Harvey said nothing. Kate took Ole Reliable's hat, turned it over and over by the light of the fire. This was Singleterry's wonderful felt hat, and Kate fingered it admiringly. It must have cost five dollars, and belonged to a negro. She glanced at Ole Reliable stupidly, then laid his hat on the bed. Harvey sat silent in the flickering light, his face patient, hopeless and uncomplaining. Presently he rose and threw a pine-knot on the fire. It blazed up merrily. Zack saw a rough box cradle with rockers on the side. A baby cried and Kate quieted it. "Dat's de onliest chile I got lef'," Harvey explained. "All de others done gone away—times got so bad."

After a while his spirits seemed to rise with the flames. "Kate, Zack was tellin' me dat times is a heap better in de bottom." With a nod he indicated that vague delta country which lay to the north. Kate did not lift her eyes; however good the times might be, "up yonder" was utterly beyond their hopes.

"De gent'man what Zack lives wid wants a lot o' families! maybe us could go?"

Kate glanced quickly at the door, and lowered her voice, "Is Uncle Zack a 'ticer?"

"No, not reg'lar; he jes' come down here to git some hands."

Harvey spoke guardedly and watched his wife's face. "'Tain't nothin' to me." She spoke without interest. "Stay or go; we can't do no wuss."

This roused in Harvey a momentary enthusiasm and he suggested, "Git us a little sumpin' to eat an'—"

Kate stared at him stolidly, "Sumpin' to eat? Whar from?"

Then Harvey remembered. Zack felt the embarrassment. "I ain't hongry," he insisted.

"I is," said Kate, with her hands folded, looking straight into the fire. "Ain't you hungry, Harvey?"

"I'm hongry 'cordin' to my supper," Harvey answered diplomatically; "I don't want nuthin' tonight."

Zack straightened up. "Kin we buy some provisions out here?"

"Dere's a store down at de bridge, but it's shut up," answered Harvey.

Then Kate spoke again. "Mr. Simpson would open dat little ole sto' ef you want to buy sumpin'. He ain't sold two bits' wuth in a week."

Harvey sat crushing his cap and smoothing it out again on his knee. "Zack," he confessed, "I didn't hab no bizness lettin' you come out here. You know how niggers is 'bout not wantin' to let on dat dey's po'. We ain't got nuthin' in de house an' no way to git nuthin'."

Having begun he spoke on desperately, "Us didn't make no cotton dis year—boll-weevil et it up. 'Twarn't wuth pickin'. Nary nigger made 'nough to pay his rent, let 'lone de sto' account. Doctor Lawrence say he can't furnish nobody dis year, 'cause he can't git no merchant to furnish him. Some niggers say de white folks don't want niggers to hab nuthin'; but dat ain't so. Ef Doctor had anything I could git it; I been on dis place more'n forty years, an' got to move."

"Don't de boss issue no rations on Saddy night?" Zack demanded.

"Rations? Rations? We would jes' as soon spec' de stars to fall."

From Zack's point of view the stars had already

fallen when the boss quit issuing rations. The idea overturned his conception of the universe and left him without a starting point. He got up briskly. "Whar is dat sto'?"

Kate likewise sprang up and dragged her husband from his chair; "Harvey, you go 'long an' show him"—a suggestion that Harvey was too ashamed to urge, and too hungry to decline.

Ole Reliable began to swell up and puff with importance. "What kind o' provisions does you-all want?"

"Meat an' meal an' molasses an' coal-oil an' salt—" Kate was afraid to scare him off and yet more afraid she might not ask enough.

"Let's walk, Harvey," said Zack. "We'se burnin' daylight."

Kate got the jug and the basket, then stood for a moment in the doorway straightening up her wig until the two men disappeared down the hill. Harvey led the way and kept well in advance; he had no tongue to talk. Just beyond the bridge was a shanty store which Zack hadn't noticed when he came out. Harvey stepped up on the shaky gallery and hesitated. "You knock," said Zack; "you knows him." Harvey rapped on the door, once, twice, then louder.

"Who is there?" a sleepy voice demanded.

"It's me, Harvey Skidmore."

"What do you want this time o' night?"

"Some provisions, please, suh."

"Can't give you anything more until you pay your account."

"Tell him we got cash money," whispered Zack; "I lay he'll wake up when he hear dat."

"We got cash money," Harvey repeated like a parrot.

Then the voice came again, in a different tone, "Wait a minute." They heard the tread of bare feet and a chink of light shot out from under the door. The bar dropped, and a half-clad white man beckoned them in.

Zack looked around and his toploftical manner rose another peg; either one of his twenties would buy out the store—either one of them. Most of the shelves were bare. Half a dozen boxes and barrels lay piled between the counters. A solitary glass case, dirty and fly-decorated, held some tawdry novelties. Simpson himself, with tangled yellow beard and hair, blinking eyes, shirt and breeches, bare feet and toes spread—Simpson seemed a shelf-worn package of humanity. "What will you have, Uncle Skidmore?"

"Meat, meal, molasses, coal-oil and salt." It was the regular formula, easy to remember and not difficult to say.

Simpson produced the packages in one, two, three

order, ready weighed and tied, poured the oil and molasses; then held out his hand. "Dollar-eighty."

Zack strode airily up and down. "What's dat candy wuth?" pointing to a bucket full of striped marbles.

"Twenty cents a pound."

"Chuck in a pound an' make it two dollars, even money. Is you got any coffee?"

Harvey opened his eyes wider while Zack bought sardines, salmon, cove oysters, crackers, gingersnaps —samples of everything that Simpson had. The bill came to four dollars and thirty-five cents. Zack nonchalantly tendered his twenty, being careful to exhibit the other twenty. "Dat's de least change I got."

Simpson fixed his diluted blue eyes upon this negro with the tan overcoat and money to burn.

"I—I ain't got that much change." He went to the rear room, searched through some empty cans and came back. "Here's eleven dollars and forty cents; that's all I got."

Harvey looked beseechingly at Zack. Zack tilted his hat rakishly. "Dat's all right, mister; we'll come back to-morrer an' git de balance."

"I won't be here to-morrow; I'm going to town. How'll we fix it?" Simpson dreaded to lose the only sale he had made in weeks.

Ole Reliable couldn't afford to be short: "Harvey, you kin come get de change some udder time."

Zack promptly picked up the basket, leaving the jug and oil for Harvey to carry. They came in gloom, but they returned in joy; they had left Kate in silence, they hailed her again with song. And when Kate looked into that basket she felt that she had the world by the tail, with a downhill pull. A single jerk set her wig on straight, she showed her teeth and opened her chatterbox. With each surprise that came from the basket she laughed. "Jes' like Santa Claus. Harvey, fill dat lamp so I kin see real good."

Zack placed the lamp grandly in the middle of the table. What matter if it did smoke and did smell? Nobody noticed and nobody cared.

Kate rose up and announced, "Now den, I'm gwine to walk about some, lak a roarin' lion seekin' dat I may devour."

They ate supper out of cups and cans, bags and bundles, and they had joy with it. Having eaten recently Zack got through first. That left his mouth free to brag about the colonel. "Cunnel sho' do take keer o' his tenants—don't begrudge 'em nuthin'. Dey has mo' in deir cabins dan you-all got in dese stores, an' dat ain't sayin' much. Dat's how come he got so many niggers. Dis year dey is clearin' up new groun', an' he wants forty families—maybe fifty or a hundred. What he wants he gits—you hear me!"

Zack's voice mounted to a dangerous pitch. He rose and made gestures.

Kate, with her mouth full of sardines and a head full of prudence, glanced apprehensively toward the door and said, "Sh!"

Zack's blood was up. He refused to be silent. "Needn't try to skeer *me*. 'Tain't nobody gwine to bother Ole Reliable for 'ticin' labor. Cunnel wants dese niggers and dese niggers wants him. Ain't no use tryin' to hold 'em apart no longer. Puts me in mind of a man and a gal when dey begins makin' sheep's eyes at each other. You can't argue wid 'em to stay apart. Dey won't hear to nuthin' 'cept runnin' to de preacher. All de arguin' comes atter dey git de preacher."

Harvey pushed back his chair and gazed; the fire glinted on his grizzled beard. "I reckin every nigger in twenty miles wants to go whar he kin make a livin'. Some o' de white folks says, 'Let de niggers go, 'cause we can't feed 'em.' An' some udder white folks says, 'We *got* to feed 'em—we got to hold niggers an' larn 'em how to fight de boll-weevils.' While de white folks is 'sputin' an' contendin' de niggers ain't doin' nuthin'."

Zack sniffed an argument from afar; he sparred for an opening and plunged in. "Up in de bottom you'll git so busy pickin' cotton an' buyin' things from de sto' you won't hab no chance to argue 'bout

nuthin'. One ole triflin' nigger cleared 'leben hundred dollars las' year."

Harvey edged away from the table and manœuvered into a strategic position; then he and Zack went at it.

Kate busied herself laying Zack's pallet on the floor in the back room. "Anything'll do me," he remarked; "I'm that tired I kin sleep on a clothes-line an' kiver wid a stepladder."

At the first peep of day Harvey turned out, chunked up the fire and filled the kettle. Zack rolled over for another nap and made no effort to move. Kate came softly and closed the middle door. Presently he heard voices at the front step. He tiptoed to the window. There were three white men on horses. One of the men was saying to Harvey, "Mr. Barker saw him on the bridge last night; tall black fellow with a tan overcoat and felt hat. He called out for 'Harvey.'"

Harvey shook his head and his mind acted like a flash. Without answering the question he put one. "Did you-all ask Mr. Simpson?"

"His store's shut up; he's gone." The man pulled aside his coat and exhibited a badge. "We are United States detectives; the government wants him."

"De guv'ment!" Harvey gasped. A constable could be bought off, folks might wriggle out of a

cote-house scrape; but when the government got after a nigger he might just as well hold out his hands to be tied.

"Yes, the United States government; there's a big reward for him. I would give you fifty dollars for information leading to his capture."

Harvey kept a perfectly blank face, "If I see 'im I'll sho' tell you; *sho' will.* Dese stray niggers gits us into a heap o' trouble."

The officers rode on. Reid laughed and remarked to McCullough, "I say, Mac, if you want to scare a country nigger just mention 'Government.' "

"Skeerin' an' tellin' is different," observed the local officer.

Harvey watched the officers until they were gone. Zack's confidence grew as their backs vanished. Harvey went into the house with a serious face. "Zack, dese white folks is done sicked de guv'ment on labor agents."

Zack calmly relighted the stump of last night's cigar. "Huh! Guv'ment ain't shucks to de cunnel."

For three nights Ole Reliable and Harvey dodged around from cabin to cabin, talking "hog and hominy" to the negroes—"bale to the acre in the bottom." There was scarcely a family in the neighborhood that was not anxious to move, but couldn't travel because they were too poor.

"Pore," snorted Zack; "you-all jes' stay here till

you gits pore as Job's turkey. Do you-all remember Job's turkey? Well, he got so pore atter while dat he had to lean up agin de fence to gobble. Cunnel 'spress hissef to me jes' like dis: 'Zack,' he say, 'it don't signify whether dem niggers is got anything or not—dey kin walk into Gatesville an' say, "Here I is, Cunnel." ' An' 'twon't be no back-talk, neither."

Zack played a star engagement as Moses pointing to the promised land. If he had been careful he might have got away with his bunch of negroes in spite of a hostile government; but he went to a meeting of the lodge wearing his tan coat and cream-colored hat. Harvey protested. "Dat's what dey seeks you by."

"Can't help it. Cunnel would be ashamed fer me to go among dese people wid a ole raggedy overcoat. He don't 'low his tenants to wear nuthin' but good clo'es."

So Zack wore the hat and overcoat by which Singleterry was described in hundreds of hand-bills offering a reward—known and watched for by every officer in the state. The special meeting had been secretly yet widely advertised among the negroes; everybody wondered at the splendid generosity with which Zack had paid Sam Kane twenty dollars for a yearling to be barbecued. "Got to hab plenty to eat, an' miracles is gone out o' style."

Word-o'-mouth men spread the joyful news, and

Sam proved it by exhibiting a bank-note. Every member came, singly and on foot, because so many mules would attract attention. Harvey got nervous. "'Mong all dese niggers dere's sho' to be a blabber."

Zack laughed. "De bigger de covey de mo' birds we'll git."

He made the speech of his life with that seductive overcoat lying on the table in full view. Even the conservative Harvey felt jubilant when they got home and nobody had bothered them. "Mo' niggers is goin' dan de steam cars kin tote."

The bother came that night, and it came without warning. Six men, possibly eight—it was hard to tell in the dark—rode noiselessly through a skirt of woods in the rear of Harvey's house. Two other horsemen stood guard in the public road near the bridge.

Reid was talking to young Henry Lawrence, who rode at the head of the posse. "Yes, Mr. Lawrence, we got a straight tip that Harvey Skidmore is hiding the counterfeiter. He passed a twenty-dollar bill on Simpson and another one on a negro named Sam Kane. Both of those bills turned up at the bank. Skidmore was seen with him both times. The fellow pretends to be a labor agent and Skidmore has been piloting him around at night. That's why you don't know anything about it."

Young Lawrence shook his head, "I don't believe

Uncle Harvey would hide a criminal. He has been with my father for nearly forty years."

The detective shrugged his shoulders and Lawrence led them into a bridle-path that turned up the hill. "There's the house," he said. Reid and Lawrence rode straight to the front; the others separated and surrounded the cabin.

Kate had just put out her light; Zack on his pallet and Harvey in the bed were still talking over the lodge meeting.

Somewhere near by a horse neighed. "What's dat?" Kate sat up.

"Nothin' but a stray hoss."

"No 'tain't. I hears a lot of 'em."

Harvey jumped up and ran to the window. "Sh! Sh! Dere's a lot o' men on hosses—'bout fifty. Git dressed, Zack."

Zack scrambled to his feet and stood in the middle of the floor. "Dere now! done got my bizness in a jam," he remarked.

A call came from outside. "Uncle Harvey!—Skidmore!"

"Dat's Mr. Henry Lawrence." Harvey's voice showed his intense relief; no harm would be done him.

"Yas suh; yas suh, Mr. Henry, wait a minute."

"We are looking for a man named 'Dressy Jack.' Is he in your house?"

Reid spoke more peremptorily. "Open that door —we want to see for ourselves."

"All right, suh."

Zack stood paralyzed and Harvey had already started to open the door. Kate grabbed him. "Tell 'em we got a sick woman in here—my sister—an' please don't make so much fuss. Ask 'em to wait a minute till I strike a match an' put on some clo'es."

Harvey fumbled at the door and parleyed with the men. Kate flew about the room. "Here, Uncle Zack, put on dis wig; git in dat bed." She snatched up his tan coat and hat, and stuffed them under the mattress. Then she lifted the baby, hid Zack's shoes and valise in the cradle and put the baby on top of them. Kate smoothed her wig around Zack's face and tucked the bedclothes under his chin. "Lie jes' still as you kin."

When Harvey opened the door, and two men came in, they found Kate lighting a lamp and turning up the wick. "Good evenin', Mr. Henry; is yo' pa well?" Kate's voice betrayed no excitement.

Henry Lawrence was kind and apologetic. "Uncle Harvey, these gentlemen are government detectives, and they want to look in your house for a counterfeiter."

"County what? Lord, Mr. Henry, you know I ain't got nuthin' like dat in here."

"Who is that in the bed?" Reid pointed with his whip to Ole Reliable.

"Dat's Kate's sister what's got de pneumonia—please, suh, don't hole dat do' so wide open."

Kate lifted the light so that both detectives could see the sick woman.

Reid turned and strode into the back room. "Bring that lamp. What's that?"

"Harvey's been sleepin' on dat quilt while my sister is sick."

Henry Lawrence closed the door so the cold wind would not blow upon the woman. "Is she very sick?"

"Tol'able bad off."

"Have you had the doctor?"

"No suh; we ain't got no money."

"Father will come over to-morrow morning." He slipped the old man a dollar. "You may need that," he whispered.

"Thankee, Mister Henry; thankee, suh."

Reid searched the house rapidly, then stepped out on the gallery and called for Mr. Lawrence to follow him. "He's made his getaway, or we had the wrong tip. Let's put the blocks to that old man and make him tell."

"You couldn't get anything out of him to-night. You have got him too badly scared. Father is com-

ing over here to-morrow; he will tell father anything he knows."

"No; we better sweat him right now; he's the last man that was seen with Singleterry."

"All right; you can try. Harvey, come here."

"Yas suh, Mr. Henry." The old man came out on the gallery and stood at one side until the two white men should get through talking.

Then everybody stopped; the sound of hoofs came from the direction of town and clattered across the bridge. The horse halted suddenly. A moment later the guard at the bridge shouted, "Oh, John! Oh, Mr. Saunders! they've caught him."

The sheriff had been sitting on his horse behind the house. "Come along, Mr. Reid," he called.

Harvey could not understand what had happened. He glanced into the dimly lighted room. Kate was near the bed pouring something out of a bottle to give the sick woman. Ole Reliable had never moved.

Lawrence and Reid straddled their horses from the gallery and rode down the hill as rapidly as they dared. Some of their men had gone before; the others followed.

The cavalcade had gathered on the bridge. Saunders pushed among them. "Where's the nigger?"

"They nabbed him in town," answered a young deputy bringing his horse alongside. "Jim Warren pulled him off that nine o'clock train."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure; he's in jail."

"Let's ride," said the sheriff. "Good night, Mr. Lawrence; sorry to trouble you." And the posse struck a lope.

"Come here, Albert," the sheriff called. "How did you pick him up?"

"He slipped down to the coal-chute and tried to get aboard the train. That is where Jim pulled him."

"Reckon he must have dodged us on the road."

"No, I think not. He is supposed to have been hiding in that negro boarding-house waiting his chance to git."

"That overcoat and hat was a dead give-away."

"No, sir; he shucked them. Had on overalls. We got a satchel full of counterfeit twenties."

"Anything to identify him?"

"Yes, sir; he had letters to Mr. Benjamin Green and Doctor Lawrence; got twenty-five dollars from the bank on another letter to Mr. Webster. Slick artist, carries letters of introduction from Colonel Spottiswoode, of Vicksburg."

"We will notify the Colonel."

"Mr. Webster telegraphed him right away. He's coming down to-morrow morning."

The joke was on Colonel Spottiswoode, and he

showed it when he stepped off the morning train. The sheriff met him with a broad grin.

"Well, Colonel, I knew you were easy, but this beats all. Negro counterfeiter going around with your introduction to banking institutions."

"Shut up, John; have a cigar and tell me what that old fool has been doing."

"He got twenty-five dollars from Jimmy Webster on a letter from you."

"That's all right, perfectly right. I told him to get money."

"Did you tell him to pass a twenty-dollar counterfeit on Ezra Simpson?"

"I'll make that good; must be a mistake."

"And did you tell him to pass another queer twenty on Sam Kane for a yearling to give a barbecue?"

"Passed two counterfeits?"

"And tried to pass another at the drug store. We can get all three of the bills."

Colonel Spottiswoode made some adverse comments on Zack's intelligence until the sheriff rubbed him the wrong way. Then he turned. "Look here, John; there isn't a bit of harm in Ole Reliable. I'll bet a hat that he can explain himself out of jail—to your own satisfaction."

"That's a bet. It would be worth a hat to hear it."

The two detectives waited at the jail and fell in

behind. Colonel Spottiswoode entered with the sheriff. The jailer led them down a corridor, undid some complicated bolts and opened the cell door. A negro sat with his face toward the window.

Saunders pointed to him. "Go ahead, Colonel; turn on his explanation."

"Zack!" The prisoner shifted his face. Colonel Spottiswoode gave one puzzled glance, then burst into a laugh. "John, hadn't you better put Zack in jail before you make him explain his way out? That's not my nigger."

"The hell it ain't. Here! You! Whose nigger are you?"

Singleterry, having taken many third degrees, turned to the window and shut up like a clam. Reid and McCullough crowded into the cell. Colonel Spottiswoode leaned up against the door; his face got redder and redder as he laughed.

"All right, John; I'll take a panama; but where is *my* nigger?"

"Damned if I know anything, and I ain't sure of that."

Returning to the jail office Colonel Spottiswoode identified his letters that had been captured with Singleterry. "And that is Zack's overcoat, I think."

McCullough, the silent man, had been doing a lot of thinking. "Saunders, we've got the wrong sow by the ear. This is our man; but the other one has

been passing counterfeits, too. We'll have to go back to the country and get him."

"If you can," grinned the sheriff; "you've made three waterhauls."

"Gentlemen," suggested the colonel, "you leave Zack to me. I'm going after that old fool myself."

"Beg your pardon, sir, but the United States has got an interest in him now."

"I can get him quicker than the Government can."

"How?"

"Go out there in the woods and whistle; he'll come."

Both detectives looked at the sheriff. "That's right; let Colonel Spottiswoode produce his man. Then we'll get this thing cleared up."

"And get his man cleared out."

The colonel wheeled. "Sir, my negro will report here to-morrow if he's in this county."

That is why Colonel Spottiswoode rode out alone to Homewood Plantation. He stopped every negro he saw and inquired for Zack. They hadn't seen him; some, perhaps, were telling the truth. To all he gave the same message, "Tell Zack that Colonel Spottiswoode will spend the night at Mr. Lawrence's house, and for him to be there."

Spottiswoode traveled deliberately; in fact, he fed along the way like a flock of geese and stopped

frequently to talk. The Grapevine Telegraph carried the news ahead. It works by mouth-power, without wires.

When the ambling and amiable colonel reached Six-Mile Bridge Zack stepped out, grinning, with his hat in hand. "Howdy, Cunnel; you sho' is lookin' fine."

Spottiswoode meant to glare, freeze and cuss, but he didn't. He reined up his horse and laughed. "Where the devil did you get those nigger-minstrel clothes?"

Zack beamed: "Swapped wid a feller; niggers is crazy 'bout 'em. Dey believe all de Sherwood tenants wears dese kind o' clo'es." Ole Reliable revolved slowly and let the colonel view him with all the high lights and all the shadows.

After a few moments the colonel put his foot on the severe pedal and inquired: "Zack, how about this trouble you've got into?"

Zack glanced up, a guiltless cherubim: "Who? Me? I ain't had no trouble; got a heap mo' niggers dan I know what to do wid; dey's ready to move when you say de word. Dey kin be in Gatesville tomorrer mornin'. I 'lowed to send you a deespatch dis very night."

"Did you see Mr. Green and Doctor Lawrence? Did they say everything was all right?"

Zack began to shuffle about uneasily and look

down at his feet: "Cunnel, I lost dem letters o' your'n by sòme hook or crook; so I jes' went along an' got dis bunch o' niggers widout botherin' nobody. Dey comes from everywhere."

Zack cowered like a rooster in a hailstorm while the colonel eased his mind. "Zack, look at me; what's all this talk about your passing counterfeit money?"

"Who? Me?"

"Yes, you. They say you passed a twenty-dollar bill on Mr. Simpson."

"Who? Me?"

"And one on Sam Kane, for a yearling," added the colonel.

"Who? Me?"

"And tried to pass another at a drug store in town."

"Cunnel, what kind o' foolishness is dat what you come out here talkin' to me?"

"Three counterfeit twenty-dollar bills—that's no foolishness."

Zack threw up both hands and clapped them against his hips. "Dar now, bless Gawd! I sho' did 'spicion dat Singleterry nigger; he war too oncommon liberal wid dat 'spense 'count."

"Yes, they put him in jail."

"Fried 'im in his own grease. Huh! He ought to be in jail. Runned off widout payin' his board-bill

an' lef' me 'sputin' wid de chambermaid. Countyfit, huh! I ain't got no time to be projeckin'; I got a bunch o' niggers on my hands. Now, Cunnel, 'tain't no sense settin' dar on dat hoss' a-laughin' an' laughin' fit to bust."

Colonel Spottiswoode spent the balance of an active day riding over Gates County paying debts for various tenants and apologizing for Zack. Following the trail of Ole Reliable was no easy job. The track he left was so tangled and devious that the colonel couldn't be sure whether the snake that made it was going forward or coming back. Zack himself was radiant until Sam Kane, with a bogus twenty in his hand and war in his eye, waylaid him behind the blacksmith shop. "Look here, nigger; dis money ain't no 'count—"

Colonel Spottiswoode stopped the altercation. "Hi, there! What's the matter?"

Sam held out the bad money. The colonel examined it. "What do you want? Change for this? All right, here's four fives and an extra dollar. By the nine gods, I'll never spend this pretty bill; can you get me some more like it?"

Sam shook his head and stared at the crisp new slip of money that Colonel Spottiswoode put away so carefully in an envelope after having marked something on the back. The more Sam thought over it the more he had to think about. "Huh! dat

sho' was purty money; I oughter got twenty-five at de very least."

A like transaction with Simpson closed the second chapter of lamentations.

The colonel followed Ole Reliable's winding trail and straightened out the tangle. Then the big road began to fill with negroes on their way to Sherwood Plantation. "Tole you so, Cunnel; I knows dese niggers like a book."

Late the next evening, after they had provided a special coach for their negroes, a weary colonel and triumphant Zack reported at the sheriff's office. Reid was consulting with McCullough when Ole Reliable rushed in, beaming, and grabbed the sheriff by both hands. "Bless Gawd, ef here ain't Mister Johnny Saunders; how you is growed! You used to be one skinny little ole white boy."

The case of the United States vs. Zack Foster exploded in an uproar of hilarity.

Colonel Spottiswoode called Reid aside and delivered the counterfeit bills, sealing the envelopes and writing his name across the flaps. "I can identify these at any time, and will bring that old man whenever you may need him as a witness. Zack, bid the gentleman good-by; it's nearly train time."

The train pulled out with all the Sherwood-bound families in their special coach. Zack rambled off to

the sleeper. "Cunnel, Mister Johnny Saunders done me wrong; he made me swap back wid Singleterry —dat overcoat an' hat. I reckin 'twarn't fair fer me to take 'vantage of a nigger what ain't got all de sense dat's comin' to him. Excusin' dat, I sho' had a good time."

CHAPTER X

HE FILLS IN, AND HAS A NEW WIFE THRUST UPON HIM

AFTER his tense activities getting labor for the colonel, Ole Reliable relapsed into an acute attack of hook-worm hustle—nothing did him any good, except the rest cure. He found complete relief sitting beside a stove in the eating house arguing scriptures. Bud Lowe always gave him a welcome—together with an occasional slice of catfish—in acknowledgment of able assistance rendered at his exoneration of 'Cindy Badger's murder, which remained a mystery.

The proprietor of the Hot Cat maintained two stoves of equal prestige. Upon that in the rear, big and flat-topped, Aunt Fanny fried her catfish and boiled her cabbage. This satisfied cravings of the flesh; those who had spiritual aspirations gathered around the little shrine in front, no bigger than a good-sized coffee-pot, perched upon its pedestal of brick and clay. Its grateful glow inspired those who spat into the box of sawdust, and adjusted national

affairs. Ole Reliable was always the first to arrive. His attendance averaged one hundred with no tardy marks. That gave him the choice of seats, with the right to open and close all debates. Between the opening and closing if an interloper wished to inject a remark he began with the poker, drowned Zack's voice by rattling on the stove, quit suddenly and shot quick.

Uncle Eli was rattling; Zack stood with his mouth open waiting to resume. Being quick on the trigger, he shot first and got ahead of Eli: "You niggers makes me tired; jes' 'cause dat comic star come along, you-all scattered like a flock o' blackbirds, some a-prayin' an' some huntin' for a hole in de groun'. Dat comic star ain't payin' you no min'—no more'n a steamboat studies 'bout a red-bug on de river bank. Hit's got a tail more'n a hundred miles long, an' comic stars can't be switchin' all dat tail jes' fer de fun o' scrapin' a two-bit nigger off de earth. Huh! dere's Uncle Eli, rigged up a flagstaff wid a sheet on top of it, 'cause a hoodoo doctor specify dat would skeer de comic."

"I wuz skeert," remarked Uncle Eli.

Ole Reliable rose up, in language and in gesture: "Skeert ain't kilt nobody yit."

All of a sudden, without warning, that part of his audience which faced the front door got up unanimously and moved. This was contrary to

precedent, it being too early for a sidewalk adjournment, where they would sit against the wall in the sunshine and wait for dinner. Zack glanced around and saw Seliny—an explanation which explained. Seliny came bulging in at the front door with her hat slanting like a lateen sail and a bandage around her jaw—a Willie Grace bandage for the pain in her face. Her unannounced appearance at the Hot Cat always caused an exodus—Zack being the most expeditious exoduster. This time he didn't dust quick enough. His wife reached out the hand which wasn't busy with her jaw: "I knowed I'd ketch you here. Didn't I tell you to go to de river to make some shingles? Here I is got de toof-ache an' ain't worked for two weeks, an' nuthin' to eat in de house."

Zack knew Seliny to be techy, but never dreamed she would humble the family pride by such an admission of poverty. Aunt Fanny came waddling forward: "What's de matter, Mrs. Foster?"

"Dis triflin' nigger—had a job drawin' shingles an' quit—he say bendin' over give him backache; quit drivin' a dray—he say de mule pulled too hard on his shoulder; quit workin' at de sto'—he say liftin' boxes give him a mis'ry in his side." She held Zack firmly by the neck and called, "Unc Eli, han' me dat barrel stave; I'll give him a mis'ry whar he won't mention."

Eli didn't hand it; he footed it promptly to the sidewalk. Zack tore loose, dodged between the tables and opened the back door. He looked down the long flight of stairs and thought of climbing up again for nothing; so he stood and listened to Seliny: "You hear me, nigger; git a job an' bring some money home dis very night—or you'll think I'm a wild woman."

Zack spoke gently, pacifically, "Don't git mad, Seliny; ain't I got a job waitin' on Colonel Spottiswoodes's dinner to-night? Dem gent'men will gimme two bits an' some of 'em fo' bits."

"Dat's jes' it," snorted Selina. "Dey laughs at yo' rigamaroles an' turns you a plumb fool; ain't got nuthin' but scrambled brains in yo' head, nohow."

Selina kicked her way out of the circle of chairs and started for the door. There she turned, and her last shot got him: "Ef you don't fetch some money home dis night I'll grease yo' head an' pin yo' ears back an' swaller you whole."

Nobody smiled. Zack righted his overturned chair and sat down. Sandy and Eli came back again like cautious rats. Having troubles of their own no gentleman alluded to the family flurry. Sandy seized his chance and began to talk in a reverent undertone.

Things were almighty quiet in the Hot Cat when Nathan Hooter stepped in. This gangling old negro with the stovepipe hat stooped through the front

door, like a long-necked goose in breeches, bowing his head under a clothes-line. Nathan carried an alcove at his middle where the rotunda should have grown; and two spikes of kinky beard flared out from the corners of his chin, like the forks of a swallow's tail. With his cane and hand-satchel, Nathan Hooter was an object to be looked at; Nathan was a man to be more than looked at, he was a man to be watched. People who dealt with him had to keep both eyes and one hand on Nathan Hooter.

He walked briskly, being busy. He said nothing, for he never talked about his business—and never attended to anything else. Nathan came nearly to the stove, looked over the group, glanced at the empty tables and turned to go. Then his eye lighted on Ole Reliable. He stopped and thought a moment; Nathan always squinted over the fence before he jumped,—which accounted for his being at large.

Ole Reliable remembered the time when he had sneaked out of Nathan's gang of cotton pickers while Nathan wasn't looking. So he kept his eyes on the stove and refused to see him. That didn't hurt Nathan's feelings, he being a practical man, and business is business. Nathan stepped up beside him and touched Zack on the shoulder, "Brudder Foster, would you kin'ly step aside wid me fer a little civil conversation?"

"No trouble, don't mention it," responded Zack.

The labor agent led Zack into a corner far from the straining ears around the stove. "Brudder Foster, do you want to make two dollars?"

"How?" inquired Zack, with the precaution which distinguished him.

" 'Tain't no work whatever; jes' a little figurin'."

"What kind o' figurin'? Less set down whilst we talk."

"No time to set down. Got to deliver fifty families in two squads; twenty families on de 'leben o'clock train, an' thirty families on de fo' o'clock train. Can't you go on de 'leben, den double back to Vicksburg an' go out agin on de fo'—jes' to fill in?"

"You wants me to take dem niggers to de plantation?"

"I wants you to go along wid 'em."

"I can't go to no plantation. I got a mis'ry." Zack retreated toward the stove—this sort of talk made his side hurt.

"Hole on, Brudder Foster, I don't aim fer you to go sho' 'nuff,—jes' to *start,—fill in.* After I gits my money fer dem families at de train, 'tain't nuthin' to me ef dey jumps off. You understands dat."

Zack began to see through the figurin' proposition while Nathan rapidly explained: "I fotched twenty-one families over from Alabama dis mawnin', but 'tain't enough. Dem two white men from de Nawf

what's pardners on Burntwood Plantation is got to have twenty families; an' Mr. Julian Gerard is got to have thirty fer Stillriver Plantation. Dey pays me extry ef I gits a full squad to de train. I figures to give Burntwood eight Alabama families, and fill in wid twelve from town; den give Mr. Gerard thirteen Alabama families, an' fill in wid sebenteen from town. Dat's fair, ain't it?"

This seemed equitable to Zack, but— "How you gwine to git twenty-nine families o' niggers frum dis town?"

A spasm of pain flitted across Nathan Hooter's face—here was a Vicksburg negro innocent of the gentle art of "filling in." "No; I ain't got to do no sech thing—dese Vicksburg niggers dey jes' fills in. I counts 'em on to de train, gits my money, an' dey jumps off as de train goes 'long; dat gives 'em a chance to git back to Vicksburg an' make de fo' o'clock train wid de udder white man."

"Which train is I goin' on?" Zack inquired.

"You goes on bofe of 'em. I can't place no 'pendence in none o' dese town niggers. Every one of 'em mout jump off at de cemetery an' give me plumb away. Dey ain't honest. I wants you to go 'long an' make 'em git off gradual."

While Zack was trying to fathom the mysteries of filling in, Nathan looked at his watch, "Eight o'clock; I got to git twelve men an' twelve women to

ketch dat 'leben o'clock train,—den five mo' couples added to dat to ketch de fo' 'clock train."

All this figuring gave Zack a headache; he couldn't understand how Nathan expected to get twelve couples of working negroes in a space of three hours. The conundrum was manifestly unguessable—Zack gave it up. "Dat's tore out o' my book," he remarked wearily, and turned his eyes longingly to the stove. Nathan grabbed his arm; "Come 'long—I kin git de biggest part o' dem niggers in ten minutes—dey fills in fer me reg'lar."

Ole Reliable balked again, "I got to wait on de table fer Cunnel Spot'swoode to-night."

"Dat ain't hinderin' you; on de second trip you kin jump off at de National Cemetery an' come right back."

"All right; lemme go git my good clo'es."

"Res' easy 'bout clo'es; I furnishes dem,—an' I sho' got a plenty."

Nathan hurried Zack up the street with a distinct objective point. Zack began to grumble.

"Hold up, Brudder Hooter; lemme ketch my bref; I sho' will deserve dat two dollars ef I keeps up wid you."

Zack's little life was kept in equipoise by opposite attractions. Two dollars dangled before him as a wisp of hay dangles before a donkey, and kept him moving. But he hated to move so fast.

Hop Meyers displayed his sign at the other end of Washington Street,—a big square glass sign with a light behind it: *"Pool for Colored, 2 1-2 cents a cue."* At night this was the lick-log for assorted negroes—working-men with money, and gamblers who came there to get it. And women. A hard crowd, but the drinks were supposed to be soft.

At this hour in the morning the crowd was unmixed, gamblers and loafers all. A dozen were sleeping in the chairs; four squabbled over a game. Others looked on stupidly.

Hooter strode to the middle of the floor. "Dink," he stopped a sporty middle-aged negro, who was just making a shot, and took him aside, "How many fillers kin you git to make dat 'leben 'clock train?"

Dink glanced down the line, "Dere's seben of 'em in here an' I knows whar dere's fo' mo'."

"How many women?" Hooter inquired.

"Family job?" asked Dink.

Hooter nodded, and Dink thought a moment. "I kin git five."

"I needs twelve."

"Den we got to hustle." Dink roused the chair-boarders, whispered a word to each and they shuffled out, walking in their sleep.

This was all Greek to Ole Reliable, but he tried to listen two dollar's worth while the men divided up their list of eligible women. "Send 'em to my shop

quick. Come 'long, Brudder Foster; we got to make de city cote."

Among the rabble at the city court, four variously colored women faced the judge for fighting and their facial appearance proved it. Each one said the other three were to blame. The judge said: "One dollar apiece."

Nathan Hooter's experienced eye took in the situation:

"Dere's Fightin' Jinsy. She's a reg'lar filler." He pointed to a yellow woman in the shady forties, which wasn't a circumstance to her reputation. Jinsy had a black eye and a cut in her lip. She also had a grouch. The dollarless quartet took their seats on the bench waiting for an officer to put 'em in the jug. Jinsy caught sight of Nathan and gave the grand hailing sign of distress. Nathan responded nobly. The police were glad enough, for they had rather have the dollar than another dose of Jinsy.

Nathan stepped up to the captain's desk, paid their fines and shoved them out of the door. "Git to my shop—quick."

Then he pulled Zack away from the court-house and they started down the street. "Now, Brudder Foster, you best walk in de lead. I got to stop by de hotel an' pacify dem white men. Don't let 'em see you wid me."

Zack sauntered carelessly ahead. Not so carelessly

that he failed to keep his eyes peeled for Seliny. In front of the hotel two men rose from their chairs and halted Nathan.

"Mornin', Marse Wigmo' an' Marse Bland." Nathan took off his hat and bent double in an exaggerated antebellum bow. Zack grinned mightily to hear Nathan making a plantation negro of himself,—but Nathan played the game.

When the first white man spoke his first word Ole Reliable knew them for strangers with a twang, instead of natives with a slur. "Well, old man, have you got our colored people all together?"

"Yas suh, ole Marster."

"How many families?"

"Twenty; jes' same as I had at Meridian las' night."

"None of them got away?"

"Lordy, ole Marster, my niggers don't want to git away from me. You couldn't drive 'em off wid a club."

"They are all plantation negroes?"

"Dese niggers don't know nuthin' 'cept cotton an' corn. Unc' Paul an' Unc' Cæsar an' Aunt Dinah an' Aunt Jemimy, ole-time befo' de war niggers. Dey's crazy to git out o' town. Dis here town scent makes 'em sick. Dey don't love nothin' but good ole country breeze. Dem's de kin' o' niggers ole Marster loves."

Both the strangers laughed and congratulated themselves. "Did you have much trouble getting them?"

"Sho' did; when you moves dat kind o' niggers away from anybody's plantation, you got to move 'em in de dark; can't even git 'em away by moonshine; ole Marster sho' will see you on yo' way to de train. Dey made three shots at me, but I kept dodgin' aroun' de bushes nigh on to two weeks 'til I got my niggers."

"Tell us about it." Both the northern men drew close with eager curiosity. But Nathan sidestepped all frivolous gossip: "Is you got de transportation ready?"

"How many tickets do you need?"

"Forty whole tickets an' fo'teen half tickets."

"Is that all the children they've got?"

"Yas, suh, some of 'em is young niggers an' ain't got no chillun yit. Dey growed up aroun' deir mammy and pappy, got married an' come 'long wid 'em. Us better feed 'em some dinner befo' de train leaves."

"Yes, I guess they want something to eat. How much will that cost?"

"Two bits a head."

Wigmore and Bland looked helplessly at each other: "Two bits? Tell us again, old man, how much is that?"

"Two bits is jes' de reg'lar name fer a quarter, ole Marster—us niggers sez two bits."

"We'll have to figure on that. Fifty-four quarters is—same price for the children?"

"Yas suh, same price. Some o' dem chillun eats more'n deir daddy. Big strappin' chillun. Dey'll pick plenty cotton dis fall. 'Twon't be long, ole Marster, befo' yo' plantation will be chock full o' young niggers, same as a canebrake full o' young rabbits."

Nathan was an artist in the way of spreading joy. He succeeded in making Jared Wigmore smile as he separated himself from the coin. Jared generally took ether. "Here's thirteen dollars and a half; is that right?"

"Whatever you say, ole Marster; I can't figger dat high."

Nathan hurried down the street and left the strangers gazing after him. "No wonder these old colored people are so poor," observed Jared Wigmore; "everybody must cheat them."

Before Nathan caught up with Ole Reliable, he had performed a swift operation in mental arithmetic. "Two bits fer lunch? Huh! dat'll give dem country niggers de lockjaw. Feed 'em fer a dime." He counted the actual mouths that he had to feed: "Sixteen grown folks an' fo'teen chillun—even money."

He transferred three dollars to one pocket for "nigger feed," and ten fifty to the other pocket for Nathan.

Nathan Hooter was supposed to run a barber shop in the front part of what had once been a store. Behind a partition was a vacant room where the shelving had been left. His regular fillers could enter through the shop, through a hall-way on the side or from the rear, according to necessity.

When Nathan led him into this big room, Ole Reliable stopped and looked. "Huh! dem niggers is in some kind of a humbug." There were upward of twenty people in the room—men and women, gathered like rag-pickers around a trash heap, snatching, tearing and wrangling. Zack looked closer and saw that it was a pile of clothes—the very worst clothes he had ever seen. Each man grabbed what he could—shoes, hat, coat, shirt, and pants—then went over in the corner and put them on. The sporty Dink stripped off those joyful trousers, folded them to preserve the creases, and stuck his legs into a pair of brown jeans, patched in the seat and open at the knees. Dink laid his derby on the shelf, and pulled a flop-brimmed hat over his eyes. Every other man was doing the same thing. The women were putting on ginghams and calicos, binding up their heads, lacing their shoes with cotton strings. In the corner Ole Reliable heard Fightin' Jinsy mouthing to

herself: "I ain't gwine to wear dis tore dress; 'tain't 'spectable. I wore dat dress las' trip. Maud, it's yo' time to wear it." She went on grumbling as she wound a dirty bandanna round her head.

It was a comical masquerade, and Zack laughed; but he was the only one; the others were in dead earnest. Nathan shoved Zack toward the rag-pile. "Hurry up, Brudder Foster, an' git on yo' clo'es."

Nathan was kind enough to select Zack's costume —blue overall breeches, hickory shirt, brogans and a relic of headgear that had once passed for a cap.

"Hurry up, git into this."

Everybody else was getting into something, and Zack honored the custom.

Hooter—the property man—went rummaging on the shelves, slinging out battered coffee-pots, bundles tied in sacks, quilts strapped together—something for every one to tote. To Zack he handed an old musket: "You looks like a hunter—tote dis. Now den, all you niggers, pair off."

Like cotillion dancers in a chance figure, they fell in two by two, a man and a woman, just as they happened. Jinsy slouched over and took her place beside Ole Reliable.

"How 'tis?" he asked.

"Family," explained Nathan. "You-all is man an' wife." Zack couldn't afford to act green, so he let it go at that. Nathan stepped in the middle of the

floor, "Shet up dat blim-blammin' an' lissen to me reel good. You-all is country niggers from Sumter County, Alabama. Lef' Uniontown yistiddy mornin' an' got here dis mornin'. You-all ain't s-posed to do no talkin', you'se plumb wore out—set up all night on de train. Jes' lie aroun' an' be half 'sleep. All couples stay together an ack lovin'. Start 'em off, Dink."

Dink doled 'em out by different doors, two and two, each letting the others get well on their way. Ole Reliable peeped through the back gate before he stepped into the street; it was risky traveling in that rig, with a huffy woman beside him. Jinsy jerked her sunbonnet to a belligerent angle, rattled her skillet against the coffee-pot, and hoofed it to the depot.

Nathan had his genuine Alabama negroes jumbled together on the boarding-house gallery across from the depot. Men, women, baskets, boxes, skillets, jugs, children, dogs,—piled up indiscriminately and overflowing into the street. Some merely sat and nodded; some had spread out their quilts and lay down; when a country nigger is sleepy, he's plain sleepy.

The twelve new couples who were recruited in town, mixed themselves into this mass so gently, nodded and slept with such tact and skill, that nobody remembered when they came. Having arrived,

they amalgamated. The most experienced planter could never have told t'other from which.

Hooter seated himself on the steps, twisting at the plaited spikes that he called a beard, and kept watch. Presently two farm wagons came creaking down the hill, their wheels locked, drivers shouting, and mules rearing back on their collars. They stopped in front of the boarding-house, two picturesque loads of plunder—bedsteads, chairs, tables, an old melodeon, jugs hanging from the axles, and dogs tied underneath. Nathan glanced them over with artistic eye. Every illusion was perfect.

That was the psychological moment to coach his Alabama negroes. "Unc' Aaron, you an' Unc' Peter, look here. You-all is settled men an' got good judgment; I wants to tell you somethin'. I couldn't git enough han's at Uniontown, so I had to scrap aroun' town fer some mo'. Dat's dere plunder in dem waggins. You-all mustn't let on to de boss dat dey didn't come from Alabama, same as you-all did. Pass 'em off fer yo' neighbors—" A couple of coins made the proposition clear. It wasn't necessary to tell the others. Information of this sort percolated through the crowd like water through a sand pile.

Nathan had his stage set and the curtain ready to go up before Bland and Wigmore came to the station. When they arrived, Jared looked over the gang

with a shrewd interest in his two-hundred-dollar investment. "Well, old man, how many have you got this time?"

Off came the hat and on came the antebellum manners, "Twenty families, ole Marster, I couldn't say nuthin' but twenty an' be right."

"None of them got away?"

"Dese niggers don't want to git away, ole Marster, 'cept from town. Dey ain't used to walkin' on dese brick roads an' done got stiff in de legs."

Wigmore threw back his head and laughed. He was in high spirits at the idea of becoming a genuine southern planter. He and his partner gazed upon their assembled people. They asked a few questions from idle curiosity, and got semi-intelligent replies, Nathan, the prompter, being at their elbow to relieve his fillers of embarrassing conversation.

"There's a picturesque old man, with that gun and dog." Nathan had given Ole Reliable a flop-eared hound to hold because it matched his musket—"I am going over to quiz him about the opossum hunting in Alabama."

"Quiz him?" thought Nathan; "what's dat?" He promptly sidetracked that dangerous proposition; "Ole Marster, what we gwine to do wid dese here waggins? It'd be cheaper to send dis plunder in de freight car—save lots o' money."

The thought of saving money switched Wigmore

off from his designs on Ole Reliable; Nathan led him toward the wagon. Their discussion ended in Nathan ordering the drivers, "Go 'long to de freight depot an' wait fer me."

The drivers made a flourishing start, cracked their whips and shouted to the mules. Wigmore watched until the wagons passed behind the freight depot. If he could have seen farther he might have watched them travel on up the hill again and turn into Nathan's back yard. There the mules were unharnessed and fed, the plunder taken off and rearranged. It was due for another performance at four o'clock.

"Git up, folks, git up—nigh train time." Nathan passed among his people, shaking some with his hands and rousing others with his toe; "Git up an' git in line."

Dink and two or three others, skilled in this business, got them all in line without apparently having anything to do with it. They just naturally fell in. Nathan called his bosses aside and whispered, "Ole Marster, you mus' watch dese niggers mighty close. Labor agents will be tellin' 'em all manner o' lies to keep 'em from goin' wid you."

"What kind of lies?"

"Tell 'em you gwine to make a slave of 'em; tell 'em you got nigger dogs to ketch 'em ef dey try to git away. You won't hab no trouble atter you git 'em on de train."

Wigmore and Bland shook their heads indignantly and patrolled the line of negroes until the train came rolling in.

"Now, ole Marster, you stan' in dat coach do' an' count every one as dey goes in. Make 'em move up forward an' set down, so de conductor kin git de transportation right."

Jared Wigmore stationed himself in the back door and passed the negroes into the coach, two by two, as the animals entered the Ark, squeezing in with their baskets and bundles. "Forty grown people," he counted; "and fourteen children."

"Jes' like I said." Nathan spoke humbly, but with a certain pride in his achievement.

As Mr. Jared Wigmore descended the car steps, jubilantly satisfied, he took a fat leather wallet from his inside pocket and was unstrapping the leather band. Nathan held his arm and whispered, "Come inside de waitin'-room, ole Marster. Dese country niggers is mighty 'spicious."

Both the partners, without understanding why, followed Hooter inside, and counted out the bills. To be perfectly sure, Nathan remained behind and spelt over his money by himself. Suddenly a black face thrust itself into his, and Uncle Aaron demanded, "What dat man give you dat money fer?"

"I'm gwine back to Georgy to git some mo' tenants—dis is to pay railroad fare an' grub."

Uncle Aaron shook his head vigorously. "Tain't so; he's payin' you dat money for we-all niggers."

Nathan slapped him jovially on the back. "Tain't dat way no mo'. Slavery times is gone, thank Gawd. Nobody can't pay no money fer you an' me."

Uncle Aaron kept shaking his head as Nathan shoved him across the platform and hoisted him up the car steps.

The conductor pulled his train out very slowly—on this run he had many tickets to take up. Those of Nathan's fillers who were scheduled to desert at the National Cemetery had moved to the forward end of the coach; some stood upon the front platform. "Tain't no sense settin' down; it's jes' a mile."

Before they came to the cemetery station negroes began dropping off, three couples in all, the women about as nimbly as the men. Ole Reliable stood with his arm across the front door. "Git back dere," he threatened a weazened yellow man. "Redwood is yo' stop. Brudder Hooter don't want us to make sech a thinnin' out all at once."

The fillers slipped off quietly and mixed with the mass outside, indistinguishable as muddy drops falling into the Mississippi River. Two miles beyond, at King's Station, three more happy families let go the rail. Zack alone took notice of them. Two more dropped at Blakely and two couples disappeared at Redwood. This left Zack and Dink, with their offi-

cial wives. Dink bent down and whispered, "Less git off, too. No sense goin' to Smedes. We kin save two-bits a-piece comin' back."

Ole Reliable sat steady in the seat. "I'm gwine to ride it out."

If Fightin' Jinsy had been sociable Ole Reliable would have enjoyed acting square with Nathan. But a man can't keep on being gallant to a woman who keeps on keeping her sunbonnet down over her face and keeps on sayin' nothin'. Zack forgot that Jinsy had a black eye and a grouch.

The Alabama immigrants were even less entertaining; they slept on each others' shoulders and hung their legs in the aisle, which broke up the fun of marching back and forth to the ice-cooler.

At Smedes Station Zack and Dink, with their better halves, the rear-guard of the fillers, stepped from one train to another and came whirling back to Vicksburg. At every station along the way they accumulated smiling and returning fillers. Ole Reliable now had room to display himself in two seats and enjoy the scenery. But he thought of Seliny and flinched.

"It's tough to know a big wife's savage bark
Is waitin' for us as we draw near home;
It's tough to know there is an eye will mark
Our coming, and flash brimstone when we come."

Zack sneaked off early to avoid the rush; he left the train two blocks above the station and manœuvered around to Nathan's by a devious way. The entire company had reassembled, with sausage, gingersnaps and catfish delicatessen, discussing the first act, and enthusiastic for an encore. As Ole Reliable entered the room he heard Nathan say, "Hurry up, you-all; swap dem clo'es all around."

Then thirty-odd negroes swapped clothes with a next door neighbor. Zack got into the general scramble, and pulled out of it with a fragmentary coat, a derby, to which part of the brim adhered, and clinging to his musket. For a moment he stood dazed, then began to ask if anybody had seen a pair of breeches—most any kind of breeches—Zack couldn't afford to be particular.

Straightway Nathan abused Dink. "What makes you throw dem pants in de corner whar nobody can't find 'em, an' us got to ketch a train? Brudder Foster, jes' put dese on."

The rents were not so deep as a well, nor the patches so wide as a church door; they would serve.

Nathan lifted his voice with the final instructions: "You-all lissen to me. Dis next white man is knowledgy; us got to be keerful." Nathan was about to slam the door behind him when Zack caught him. "Hole on, Brudder Hooter; I got to drap off at de cem'tery dis trip."

"You Zack," she yelled

"Nuthin' to hinder you; you ain't gwine to be tied?" And that's where Nathan showed a weak head.

The second act would have been pulled off without a hitch if it hadn't been for Seliny, and she wasn't down on the bills. Julian Gerard was a different type of planter from Wigmore and Bland. Gerard knew a few wrinkles in the labor game. Nathan had to walk chalk and talk straight. He cut out that piece of stage business with the wagons.

When Hooter got his crowd lined up to file into the coach, Gerard stood a little ways off talking to a friend who was unbeknown to Nathan. This friend was Watt Crabbe, Gerard's manager on Stillriver Plantation. If it hadn't been for Gerard's consultation with Crabbe the calamity might not have happened to Ole Reliable. And Colonel Spottiswoode might not have missed his valuable services at dinner. But Gerard did whisper something to Watt Crabbe as Nathan began marching his negroes on to the train. Gerard counted them into their special coach, where they took seats with due dignity and decorum. No foolishness about that.

"Come here, Nathan," Gerard called Nathan and stopped in full sight of the train. "There's thirty families; I owe you a hundred and fifty dollars. Have you been tolerable honest?"

"Yes suh, boss. I kin go to Gawd wid what I tole you."

"Well, if you haven't—"

The conductor signaled the engineer; Nathan had reached for his money; Gerard had turned to catch the hand-rail—then something broke loose. The crowd outside rushed toward the center of the coach; two policemen caught hold of a fat woman with a bandage around her jaw. But they didn't catch hold of her jaw. Selina made fighting gestures toward the coach window. Zack ducked, and left Selina a side view of Jinsy's sunbonnet.

"You Zack," she yelled, "come out o' dere!—traipsin' roun' wid dat Jinsy 'ooman, callin' her yo' wife; all dressed up in country nigger clo'es. Git off dat train!"

Gerard withdrew his handful of bills. "Nathan, what's that row?"

"Nuthin', boss; two wimmen fightin' over a man. We can't he'p dat wid country niggers."

Gerard had prepared for contingencies; he pulled out a check already written, payable to the order of Nathan Hooter for one hundred dollars. "Here's fifty dollars in cash and my check for one hundred. If this gang is crooked I'll stop payment of the check by telephone—*and come back to see you.*"

The train gathered speed and pulled him out of hearing. Nathan didn't relish what Mr. Gerard

said, nor the way Mr. Gerard looked. Dink caught his danger signal, but it was too late for him to lean out of the window and get details. Nathan Hooter stood and watched the disappearing train. Something awkward was going to happen to thirty-four of his best fillers when they attempted to get off.

What thereupon took place was all the doings of Watt Crabbe. Instead of going to the back end of the sleeper and lighting a cigar, Watt caught the front end of the extra coach, with a brakeman who weighed a hundred and seventy pounds. Crabbe was no bantam.

Having the engagement with Colonel Spotfiswoode Ole Reliable pushed his way to the front, preparatory to dropping off at the cemetery. He stepped aside on the platform to let the two white men pass. But they did not pass. They shoved him back into the coach. "Passengers not allowed to stand on the platform," said the brakeman as he deliberately locked the door.

That's what gave Ole Reliable the first symptoms of being sick. He ran back through the crowded aisle. Julian Gerard and the conductor blocked the rear door. Ole Reliable heard the conductor say, "Jule, how many hands have you got?"

"Sixty whole, and twenty-one halves."

"Any one else in this coach besides your gang?"

"Nobody but my negroes in here."

"Then I'll come back after I get my train checked up and count 'em."

The brakeman passed through the coach, put down the windows, and opened the ventilators.

Zack looked at Dink and Dink looked at Zack; both of them looked at Jinsy. Fightin' Jinsy shrugged her shoulders. Which was about all that happened.

That coach went straight through to Stillriver Plantation with Ole Reliable sitting beside Fighting Jinsy—a seventeen-barreled elopement of mismated couples, personally conducted by Julian Gerard, who sat in the back door and held the key.

CHAPTER XI

HE GETS ON THE GOOD SIDE OF THE WHITE FOLKS AND THE BAD SIDE OF THE NEGROES

OLE RELIABLE was locked up in the special coach, with all those Alabama negroes, and that white man had the key. He was also locked tight and fast in the new matrimonial alliance which Nathan Hooter had thrust upon him—a fighting yellow woman with one eye black and her lip cut. These were two awkward lockups for a respectable married man, who couldn't get out of either one.

The heavy train rumbled out of Vicksburg; Zack hadn't the faintest idea where he was going, so he tried to think back to where he came from. Much as he loved to hang around the railroad and see things happen, this thing happened too almighty quick. He had not been bothering anybody, just leaning out of the coach window when Selina came along and grabbed him. He saw two policemen leading her away—four policemen would have made Zack feel easier; then, when he tried to step off at the National Cemetery as Nathan Hooter told him, those two white men shoved him back into the coach

and locked the front door. The thing happened so brief it made him dizzy; the whole map of Europe changed in a blink. Zack climbed over Fighting Jinsy and sat down again in the only vacant seat. All of which didn't affect the train. It went bowling along just as if everything were proper and regular.

Every seat in the coach held two negroes, generally a man and a woman; sometimes a child—maybe two. Most of them went promptly to sleep; to those who actually came from Alabama this made their second night on the road. Those who had been palmed off on the planter in Vicksburg must pretend to be sleepy in order to keep up the illusion. Some spread pallets in the aisle for themselves and their babies. Every available shelf and corner held its bundle—mostly bedding, boxes, baskets, guns, fiddles—the miscellaneous plunder which negroes carry with them and that miscellaneous unforgetable smell.

Julian Gerard, the prosperous young owner of Stillriver Plantation, was the sole white man in the coach. He it was who sat on the stool with his back against the rear door. He was the white man that had the key. Julian smoked in self-defense; eighty-one negroes tightly shut in a coach made it necessary for him to smoke. He watched the negroes, smoked and pondered; for the planter faced a problem. Every grown negro on that car knew what he wanted

to find out, but not one would tell him; so he did not ask. Neither was it an abstruse problem. All he wanted to know was—which of those negroes actually came from Alabama and which did not. That seemed simple enough.

Nathan Hooter had, in fact, brought thirteen families, charging Gerard with expenses on the thirty. The other seventeen he picked up in Vicksburg, unattached men and women, dressed them as farm laborers from his abundant stock of costumes and matched them into families for the occasion. Nathan furnished the costumes and the brains. Each of the others furnished a negro apiece of assorted sexes, which made a fair partnership. In active seasons Nathan often caught two or three suckers a day with his gang of "fillers." For each family he got five dollars from the planter, which furnished Nathan a reasonable and honest profit. Of course these fillers would jump off the train and hurry back to be ready for the next sucker—and claim their half of the five. Nathan played a nice game according to the rules, but Julian Gerard wouldn't play it that way. He had the front door of the coach locked and that's what made seventeen couples think thirty-four different kinds of damns. It prevented Ole Reliable from stepping off at the National Cemetery and serving dinner that night for Colonel Spottiswoode. It also prevented Ole Reliable from sitting easy.

Julian sat and smoked; there wasn't a Vicksburg negro in the coach who would own up to being a "filler"; there wasn't an Alabama negro who would tell on him. The only way Jule could find out would be to take the whole bunch to Stillriver and run them through his sifter, which would separate the sheep from the goats.

But Julian wasn't the only fellow with a problem; seventeen women and seventeen men had troubles of their own. Not one of them had a dollar; not one of them had a bit of baggage. They didn't want to work and they had rather be in jail than be on a plantation.

"Dink," whispered Ole Reliable to the erstwhile sport, "what you reckin dat white man gwine to do wid us?"

"Keep yo' mouf shet an' yo' legs limber," suggested Dink, and followed his own advice.

Julian began looking at his watch. "Ten minutes yet," he said; then, "Five." "Two." As the last minute expired he unlocked the door. Watt Crabbe, his plantation manager, came across the platform from the next coach, watch in hand. "I'm on time, Jule; come back when my hour is up; tote fair." Gerard disappeared into the rear coach for a breath of fresh air. Crabbe took his seat, stood his guard and sweated out his hour. When Gerard came back at the end of his furlough the two men talked long

and earnestly. Watt Crabbe protested vigorously, then surrendered. "I wouldn't do it, Jule; it's more trouble than it's worth. Just stop the train—put off these Vicksburg niggers and be done with it."

Gerard was a stubborn human proposition when he had once made up his mind. "Yes, I know; but that old hound Nathan has been playing this same trick on delta planters for years. When I get through with his 'fillers' they won't want to fill in any more. A few more doses like this will break them up."

Ole Reliable leaned forward on his seat trying to catch a whisper; presently he nudged Dink. "Wonder what dem white men is talkin' 'bout?"

"Us," Dink answered sententiously.

Ole Reliable kept his seat beside Fighting Jinsy in the utterly disreputable costume that Nathan Hooter had rigged up for him to play his part as a country nigger from Alabama. Zack was disgusted with himself and with the woman beside him; but his disgust was as nothing to the hate and scorn which Jinsy flung at him before she turned her face permanently away. If Jinsy only had had her wig and her good clothes, she might have been in a better humor; but all things conspired against Zack. He sighed and settled back. "When luck's agin you, you might jes' as well lie flat on yo' back an' say: 'Here I is, Luck; what you gwine to do wid me?' "

Presently Dink leaned over and whispered: "How fer is dis place we're goin' to?"

Zack shook his head, "Don't know, but it's fer a-plenty. Nathan is got to pay us extry fer dis." Jug-head Jerry leaned across the aisle. "I know how fer it is—it's fo'teen miles from a drink." Zack never knew how he was going to look at any proposition until he heard himself talk about it. He had to talk it over with himself to get the situation clearly in his mind. So he made another trip to the ice-cooler, where he could be alone, picking his way down the aisle as carefully as if it were an egg-strewn floor, stepping over sleeping negroes and crawling babies, steadying himself as the train swept around a curve. At the very front end of the car he stood and argued it out to a conclusion: "I knows jes' dis much: I got into dis mess by mixin' up wid niggers. I got to git on de good side o' de white folks to git out." It did not occur to Zack that he might have trouble getting on the good side of a man whom he had planned to swindle. Having settled it that way—that he must get on the good side of the white folks—he went back to his seat again.

About half-past eight Julian Gerard called out through the coach: "Everybody get ready—next stop is ours."

The negroes roused themselves, waked their babies, gathered their belongings and crowded the

aisle. Zack and Jinsy had neither babies nor belongings; they could only help to crowd the aisle. The train stopped. Before the coach was opened Watt Crabbe swung himself to the ground. Perhaps a dozen plantation negroes were waiting in the dark, dim and spectral, with smoking lanterns. "Hector—here, Hector!" Watt Crabbe called the head teamster and whispered something to him. Old Hector grinned and passed the word to the driver of every team: "Tell dese niggers 'tain't but jes' a few steps over to de plantation."

Dink was the very first negro to jump off; he ran to one of the drivers and asked the question: "How fer is dis here plantation from de railroad?"

He got a prompt and reassuring reply: "'Tain't no way; jes' a little piece over yonder in de woods."

Ole Reliable stood at Dink's elbow with his ears set forward. "Dat's all right, Dink," he whispered. "Us kin walk back an' ketch a train whenever us gits ready."

Dink spread his joyful information and none of the fillers attempted to reënter the train they had just left, which would not have succeeded, for Gerard had thought of that.

After tumbling out a lot of baggage the train whirled on; its last green light vanishing behind a jutting forest. Something seemed to snuff it out, like a torch thrown in the sea—snuffed out the

only light which shone in the heavens or on the earth except those smoky lanterns in each wagon.

It was a cold night for the south and the negroes shivered. It was a dark night even for the swamp and threatening rain. The Vicksburg negroes looked gloomily around them. Not a house was in sight; nothing except the tiny station. Even as they looked at that, its single light went out.

"Nothing to it," remarked Dink as he got into the wagon which was assigned him. Dink noticed that four other white men had evidently come out from the plantation with the wagons. Six whites in all—another potent argument against making trouble.

"Women with children in the first wagons." Gerard gave this order out of no spirit of gallantry. He knew that those negroes who had brought children as well as wives were bona fide home-seekers. He wanted to settle them at once in the best cabins, where they would remain; and he wanted to keep the unencumbered pairs together, where they could be watched. As each wagon took its load of negroes and plunder it drove on a few lengths and stopped until everything was ready; then the caravan began to move. The hopeless gloom spurred Ole Reliable in his determination to get on the good side of the white folks. This kept him at every white man's elbow every minute of the time, helping efficiently and never failing to mention: "Dis is Unc' Josiah!

I sho' is glad to git a good home." It was not long before he picked out Jule Gerard as being the head boss and devoted all attention to him.

The six wagons next to the last carried those couples who had no children; in the seventh, the tail-end of the whole procession, rode Ole Reliable and Fightin' Jinsy alone with the driver. "Lordee, boss," he laughed to Jule Gerard, "I come purty nigh fergittin' to git in de wagin myself, I war so busy helpin'. Dis is Unc' Josiah."

Through the darkness and the mud, through the solemnity and the silence, they went, each wagon following the lantern which swung from the tail-board of the wagon just ahead. The roads were bad even for the swamp and the light flickered on pools of stagnant water at each side.

Beside each of the last six wagons rode a white man on a floundering horse—a stalwart, unspeaking man. As they dragged, hub-deep, through the darkest and boggiest swamp, where nobody would be fool enough to jump from a wagon, Gerard reined in his horse and let Watt Crabbe catch up. "Watt, I believe every single negro in these last six wagons is a filler. They haven't enough bedding in the crowd for one couple. If we get a dozen working families out of that entire bunch we're lucky; but I'm going to have fun with 'em before they get back to Vicksburg. Can't you think of some mean job?"

Watt Crabbe didn't have to think. "Make 'em clean out the ditches; make 'em build the pasture fence, drain Goggle-eye Slough—"

Jule Gerard laughed. "Good for you, Watt. Drain Goggle-eye Slough—that's a tough job—make 'em sick."

The men beside the wagons kept smiling at the constant and anxious questions they heard. "Say, friend, how much furder?" Always the same answer: "Jes' a little piece."

Jinsy, in the very last wagon, got the fidgets.

"Look here, nigger," she demanded of the driver; "is we gwine to ride all night?"

"No; we mought break down an' hafter walk," suggested the driver.

Ole Reliable held his tongue. On a cold and dismal night twelve miles of swamp road is no joke. If it had been a joke these fillers would not have appreciated it.

Midnight came before they pulled up in front of the Stillriver store. The store was brilliantly lighted with three huge lamps which poured a thick stream of yellow across the blackness of the road. Two white men and a negro porter appeared on the edge of the gallery, flinging their gigantic shadows across the mysterious field beyond. The first wagon pulled into this zone of light and stopped. The Alabama negro and his wife looked with curiosity and pride

at the store; it was so much bigger than any they had ever seen except in the town.

"Huh!" remarked Uncle Aaron. "Dis mus' be a gran' plantation."

Julian Gerard and Watt Crabbe got off their horses and stood on the steps. Ole Reliable sprang out of the last wagon, ran forward and caught their bridles. "Oh! that you, Uncle Josiah?" remarked Jule Gerard.

"Yas suh. I'm right here, suh."

Then Gerard turned to the negro in the first wagon. "What is your name, old man?"

"Aaron McNair, suh."

"How many children have you?"

"Three, suh, an' my wife's sister."

"Watt, what do you say—give him that second cabin, the one with the new roof?"

"Very well, it will do for a few days. Five rations," he called back into the store. The negro porter came out immediately with an armful of small packages, which he dumped into the woman's lap—enough to feed the family for several days. Wagon by wagon they passed the store, each family being counted, provisions put in and quarters assigned. The fillers drew their rations in the ordinary course.

Great care was taken in the placing of these families; those that had children were expected to remain on the plantation and make good tenants. But

when the other wagons came along, with their suspected freight, Watt Crabbe suggested: "Jule, we had better keep this bunch of negroes mighty near to the house, so we can watch 'em."

Ole Reliable got back into his own wagon when it came time to drive along with Jinsy and draw his rations. He had listened to the questions which were asked the other fillers until he felt like the seventeenth man to be hanged after watching the others dangle at the end of a rope. Jinsy paid no attention whatever; never even turned her head. Zack's strategic position had one advantage; it gave him time to think. Some of the fillers had wabbled in their answers. When Zack's time came he recited like the prize scholar at the Sunday-school. If ever a man needed to be tactful Zack was it. Being hungry and without a nickel he could not afford to quarrel with his commissary. "Yas suh," he answered promptly: "I'm sick o' workin' in dem red hills and gullies an' not makin' no cotton at de end o' de year. I always is wanted to git to dis swamp."

"Were you raised in town or in the country?"

"I war raised in Sumter County, Alabama. Ain't never stayed in town three days in my whole life," replied Zack.

"What can you do on the plantation?"

"Mos' anything; plow, hoe, chop cotton, pull corn, or split rails if necessary."

"How much cotton can you make in a year—you and your wife?"

"We kin 'tend twenty-two to twenty-five acres ef it ain't dis Bermuda grass."

"Can you pick it all out—that's the main thing?"

"I can't tell, boss; but ef I can't I'll skeer it mighty bad."

Gerard laughed. "You must be a good workman."

"Yas I is, boss; I works 'kin an' can't.' "

" 'Kin and can't'—that's a new one on me. Is that a share hand or a renter?"

Zack laughed. "Either way, boss; either way. I begins to work jes' as soon as it gits light so I kin see, an' I don't never stay my han' till it gits so dark dat I can't see no longer."

Gerard laughed loudly. "All right; you'll do. Ben, take Uncle Josiah and his wife over to that single cabin just the other side of the lot. That's the best cabin on this place. And Ben, be sure to leave him a lantern and see that some wood is cut."

These few kind words cheered Ole Reliable mightily. He rode on; and the night did not seem so cold until he looked at Fightin' Jinsy and thought of Selina. Zack wriggled around and wished that Jinsy would talk and give him an inkling as to what she was studying about. Ben, the driver, began to chat affably, making fair weather with a new-comer who,

had favorably impressed the boss. "Us sho' is glad to see you-all folks. We needs a heap—"

"Shut up," ordered Jinsy; "you'se de lyin' nigger what tole me 'twarn't but a little piece over here from de railroad."

Being close to Jinsy, Ben shut up and never spoke again until he drew up in front of their cabin. It was a good cabin. The driver spoke enthusiastically: "It's got a fence around it an' a big, dry seed-house." For which dry seed-house Zack thanked his stars before the night was over.

"Dere's plenty wood already cut; make up a big fire an' den you-all will feel at home."

Jinsy unloaded herself from the wagon with her armful of provisions and never turned to look back. She jerked open the gate and marched into the house with the skillet and coffee-pot which she had brought from Nathan Hooter's. Zack clung to a small bundle of something or other. He hadn't the faintest idea of what was in it, but it ought to be useful. Ben lifted his lantern and lighted them into the house, then turned back and began feeling around in the wagon.

"Oh, Mr. Walker—"

Zack hadn't got used to recognizing his new name. Ben called again: "Mr. Walker, whar is all yo' things?"

Jinsy stopped in the door with her arms akimbo.

"Dat's all de things we got. You country niggers better 'tend to yo' own bizness." Jinsy strode into the house and slammed the door in Zack's face.

"Huh!" observed the driver; "dat's mighty curious. Here, Mr. Walker, maybe you better take dis here lamp o' mine—I kin git along widout it."

Zack thanked his new friend and stood there on the gallery until Ben drove off and left him alone—which was not a pleasant feeling. Then he could hear nothing—absolutely nothing. Jinsy wasn't even moving around in the room. If it had been Selina breaking up the furniture Zack would have felt better. Jinsy's dumb tantrums scared him sick.

Presently, as nothing seemed to blow up, Zack rapped on the door very gently, very humbly; but Jinsy had a permanent grouch. The old man stood silent for a while, then put the bundle down and went out to the woodpile. Whenever Selina had a grouch it behooved him to cut wood. Somebody had been thoughtful enough to do the chopping. Zack picked up a turn of wood and dropped it noisily on the gallery. Having announced himself, he suggested:

"Jinsy, don't you aim to have no fire?" the cold forced Jinsy to open the door; she stood sullenly in the middle of the room while Zack knelt at the hearth and started a blaze. Ole Reliable had been trained at a good school. He knew that there were two occasions when a man must not talk—one is

when the woman wants to talk and the other is when she doesn't. This being one of those occasions Zack ventured no remark. When he got the flames to crawling over his back log he warmed his stiffened fingers, then rose and went out on the gallery for his bundle. The room was utterly bare except for a bed-frame which stood in the corner with a lumpy mattress on it. The other furniture consisted of the broken skillet and leaky coffee-pot that Jinsy toted, together with three little packages of provisions which Jinsy had piled in the middle of the room.

Zack came back with his bundle, which was presumably bedding, knelt beside the light of the fire and began fumbling at the cotton rope with which the quilt was tied. Jinsy stood guard over him and when she expressed impatience he used his teeth on the knot. The bundle fell open and unrolled a mass of rags without a scrap which was big enough to cover a baby; but there was another package in the middle and Zack eagerly went into that—a wad of excelsior tied in a newspaper, with a brick to give it weight. This was the stage dummy which had served Nathan Hooter for many years. Zack scrambled up from his knees and stared down at the thing. Jinsy broke loose. "If ever I gits back to Vicksburg what I'm gwine to do to Nathan Hooter will be aplenty." But Nathan was far away; so she turned on Zack. "Git out o' here, you triflin' ole nigger—git out o'

here. If you can't take care of a lady no better dan dat—"

Ole Reliable got out promptly and the lady locked the door—unnecessary precaution.

Ole Reliable sat wearily on the step and gazed through the leaden night. He could see no light, no homey twinkle of a human habitation. Fortunately he had the driver's lantern locked out with himself instead of locked in with Jinsy. Which was a square deal, for the woman had the firelight.

Zack was sleepy. He nodded and propped his head against the post, then straightened up with a solemn jerk. "Fust thing I know I'll be goin' to sleep right here on dis damp gallery—git all crippled up wid rheumatiz." He had to go to sleep somewhere if not on the damp gallery. Damp! The word naturally set him to thinking of "dry" and "dry" naturally led his mind to the seed-house, which Ben had strongly recommended for that quality. It was inevitable that Zack should sleep in that seed-house.

Zack picked up his lantern and went reconnoitering for a bunk. The seed-house was built close to the cabin, not more than forty feet away. Forty miles would have suited him better. Otherwise it was a very competent seed-house—dry, tight, with some thirty or forty bushels of seed in it. Zack didn't bother his head about how there came to be this much seed in a nigger's seed-house at that time

of the year: he just crawled in, crawled under and went to sleep.

Long before the plantation bell rang next morning a cautious old negro untangled himself from under that pile of seed. As he poked his head out with prudence and looked round he saw nothing. Even if Jinsy had seen him first she might not have recognized him. Cottonseed stuck all over him, clung to his clothes, mixed with his frizzled hair; and the lint of it whitened his face and eyebrows like a dusty miller. The cabin was just as he had left it. A faint glow of light from the dying fire beat against the window-panes; he heard no sound inside. Possibly the woman slept. Zack hoped so—he hoped she would continue to sleep. The world being safe Ole Reliable climbed out of the high door of the seed-house and stopped to consider. He was very hungry. Jinsy hadn't offered to share her supper with him; she had the provisions locked up in the house and that killed his chances for breakfast. This bothered Zack slightly, very slightly—almost imperceptibly, in fact. As long as there were white folks alive, with a cook and a kitchen, Zack never worried about his meals. A free man in a free world, he stepped out of the cabin yard and shut the gate softly behind him. There was the big road—a muddy road; but he thanked God that it had no fence across it. Zack didn't know where he was. There were no land-

marks to guide him. He sniffed a time or two, then struck an airline for the nearest white folks' kitchen.

Julian Gerard and Watt Crabbe kept "bach" in a little red house of six rooms about a hundred yards from the store. It was rather crude, for Stillriver was a new plantation and living conditions bordered on the pioneer. Zack barely glanced at the front part of the house; his business lay in the rear, where smoke was coming out of the kitchen flue. The first note of joy was the rattling of pans inside. Scraping his feet with great care and ostentatious noise, he pushed open the kitchen door. "Good mornin', ma'am."

The cook turned—just an ordinary plantation cook. Zack knew all the various conditions of cooks, their fortifications and their weaknesses.

"Good mornin', brother," she said. Then he knew she was a church woman.

"Good mornin', sister," he answered unctuously; "I hopes you is well. De good book say: 'I have been a stranger in a strange land.' "

"Den come right in here an' set down an' make yo'sef easy. De good book say: 'He war a stranger an' I tuk him in.' "

That put them on an easy footing, far past the period of negotiation—and anxiety. Zack took his seat on a split-bottom chair behind the stove and watched as he listened, listening being Zack's long

suit when he wished to make an impression on the cook; and he knew just what to do. He kept the fire burning brightly, brought fresh wood, and scraped the pots. When they heard a stirring in the main house Sister Debby started in to see the boss.

"Sis Debby," Zack whispered, "jes' one minnit, please, ma'am. How is de boss befo' breakfast? Is he all right or is he kinder raw?"

"Yes, he's kinder raw, 'ceptin' he's whistlin'; an' hit's all right den. Ef he ain't whistlin' you better wait till atter dinner; den he'll do mos' anything you axes him."

"Please ma'am, speak it to him soft dat Unc' Josiah wants to see 'im."

His envoy went in at once to tell the boss and Zack could hear the answer: "Tell him to come right on in."

Gerard was lying on a bed in one room and Watt Crabbe had just got up from a bed in the other. The door was open between; they were laughing, calling back and forth to each other. Gerard whistled little snatches of rag-time music and Zack knew it was all right. So he knocked on the door. "Come in, old man; what's your trouble?" Gerard leaned up on his elbow and smiled as Zack stuck in that fuzzy bald head.

Zack dropped his hat at the threshold and stood a moment. "Boss, I'se Uncle Josiah."

"Oh, yes. Watt! Oh, Watt!" he called. "Here's that old man that works 'kin and can't.' "

"Yas, suh; I'se de one. I hates to come to you dis soon in de mornin' wid a complaint, but I ain't got nobody 'cept white folks to go to. Boss, I jes' can't git along wid dat 'ooman. I oughter lef' her to home. I had to sleep las' night in de seed-house an' she won't gimme no brekfust dis mornin'."

Watt Crabbe came and stood in the door with a razor in his hand. Both of them looked at Ole Reliable and both of them laughed. "You look like you've had a bad time. Just wait around the house until after breakfast and we'll see what can be done for you."

Watt Crabbe kept looking at the razor and running his hand over his beard. "Say, Jule, I've got to shave. I'd rather take a beating. Just tears my face all to pieces."

Zack darted out to the kitchen. In a moment he returned with some hot water. "Now, boss, you jes' set right down dere in dat chair and lemme shave you. I allers used to shave old Marse." Zack knew this kind of men and he knew exactly where they kept things—everything in sight. Watt sat down a minute and knew from the way Zack stropped that razor that he was an old hand. Zack put a keen edge on the razor, soaped Watt's face and rubbed it in thoroughly. "Well lathered is half shaved, boss—

you know dat." Then he gave Watt Crabbe such a shave as he hadn't had in many a day. Watt rose beamingly and walked to the mirror, feeling all over his face with both hands.

"Say, Jule," he called enthusiastically; "get up and let Uncle Josiah shave you. I wish I had it to do over again."

Zack passed into the next room with his brush and lather. While he shaved the boss he kept his eyes busy and measured both the men. He didn't miss their dimensions very far, either in inches or in disposition. Watt Crabbe's clothes would be too big for him, but Gerard's breeches would just about fit; so Zack kept eying a pile of clothes that lay in the corner. He knew full well that before night came he would have his pick.

He took up the shirt of yesterday and removed the buttons. The same instinct that led him to the white man's kitchen enabled him to put his hands promptly on the white man's shirt. Selecting another just like the one that had been taken off, Zack put in the buttons. Quite as a matter of course he brushed Gerard's clothes, smoothed out the wrinkles and laid them on a chair. Then he disappeared to clean the shoes and leggings. Both the white men were dressed when Zack came in again with a tray from the kitchen—two cups of coffee, two slices of bread cut very thin, on the very nicest plates they

had. Aunt Debby always slung them in any old way on a tin plate.

"Say, Jule, this is what I call livin'; ain't it?" remarked Watt Crabbe.

Zack returned just in time to hear Gerard saying to his manager: "Oh, Watt, Colonel Spottiswoode expects to have the highest water in twenty years, and—" The old negro stood with eyes wide open, listening; listening so frankly that he attracted Gerard's attention, which emboldened Zack to inquire:

"'Scuse me, boss, but did you say cunnel was gwine up to Kathleen Plantation dis week?"

"Yes; to fight the high water."

"How fer is Kathleen from here?"

"About thirty miles. Do you know Colonel Spottiswoode?"

"Know Cunnel Spottiswoode? Who? Me?"

Zack saw that his enthusiasm was dragging him into error. He saw that Gerard was going to ask how an Alabama negro happened to know the colonel. So Zack shut up quick; and Gerard knew it was not an opportune time to press him with questions. So he gave the frightened negro a chance to slip from the room.

"Watt," said Jule, "that old negro is no farm hand, and he knows Colonel Spottiswoode. Watch him."

About eleven o'clock in the day Gerard held his

first preliminary line-up of the thirty new families; everybody assembled at the store—men, wives and children. Ole Reliable was not in line; he was buzzing around, tending to the white folks' business. Jinsy was not in line. "Boss, I 'spèc' dat 'ooman is sick; she ain't no 'count no way."

"Well, Uncle Josiah," suggested Jule, "I'll just send you over there to get her."

"Now, boss—"

Jule laughed and it was all right.

Gerard passed down the line of negroes, taking their names, even to the children. Having made a complete list of his new tenants he called for a table to be set on the gallery. There he took his seat, picked up a folded paper and explained to them that it was a printed form of the rental contract generally used in Mississippi. The farming negroes were already familiar with it and the others didn't care.

"If there's a man or a woman here who is not satisfied, now is the time to speak out."

The Vicksburg negroes glanced at one another and said nothing.

"Aaron McNair," Gerard called from his list. A middle-aged Alabama negro, with a beard—a good-looking man—stepped forward and, after making a few intelligent inquiries, signed his rent contract for thirty-two acres of land. This was duly attested by two witnesses, which the law required. "Now,

Aaron, here's your order for a week's rations. Better have it filled at once, for the clerks are going to be mighty busy."

Aaron turned into the store and got his provisions. Gerard went straight down the line of thirty men and their wives. As each couple signed the contract they got an order for rations, proportioned to the number of mouths to be fed. By this contract they became tenants for a year on Stillriver Plantation; but the Vicksburg negroes, of course, had no intention of keeping it. They wanted to get rations and a chance to slip away.

It took a surprisingly short time to fill these orders—meat, meal, molasses, rice, oil, matches, etc. —as every package had practically been weighed and tied in advance. The negroes reassembled on the store gallery, each with an armful. Some of them began going down the steps, starting to their cabins.

"Hold on, boys," said Jule. "I want to tell you something. Uncle Zack! Oh, Uncle Zack!"

Ole Reliable promptly stepped forward. "Here, suh."

Gerard smiled. "I didn't mean you; I was calling the porter, Zack Pettigrew."

Ole Reliable looked foolish and the Vicksburg negroes snickered as the porter came out and the boss told him: "Bring me that law-book."

With great dignity the porter laid a code of Mississippi on the table. "Now all you people listen to this." Gerard began to read and explain. "The law of Mississippi says, if you make a contract like this and obtain money or rations with the intention of defrauding your employer, you shall be put in jail for six months and fined a hundred dollars. You Alabama people are honest and straight; but I just want to remind you."

"Dat's all right, cap," spoke up old man Aaron, the patriarch of the Alabama colony. "We got dat same kind o' law in Alabama. All us knows dat hit don't hurt no honest man. We can't 'spec' to eat yo' grub an' den run away."

The Vicksburg negroes nudged one another—it would be impossible to catch or identify them; and nobody put down the grub.

"Now listen to me again: every man and woman, except those who have *children,* must come back to the store at two o'clock. The bell will ring and I'll call the roll."

Ole Reliable signed that agricultural contract for a year and drew his rations, because it seemed to please the boss, and he wanted to keep on the good side of the white folks. All the other Vicksburg negroes were acting square and his refusal might cast suspicion upon his integrity. His best reason, however, was rations.

When all the other negroes had gone, Zack still hung around the store, got a broom and swept off the gallery. "Dese niggers brought a mighty heap o' mud on dis gallery wid deir big feet."

Gerard watched his manœuvers and then remarked, quite carelessly, "Uncle Zack, come over to the house with me for a minute."

"Comin', suh."

Ole Reliable followed Gerard into the small disorderly room which did duty as an office. The boss sat down in the revolving chair.

"Uncle Zack, get that decanter out of the sideboard and mix up a couple of toddies. Mr. Crabbe will be along in a minute. Take a drink yourself if you want it."

Ole Reliable vanished with the decanter, found sugar, water, ice, with a scrap of lemon and a sprig of mint on the side. Presently he came back bringing the toddy. Jule sipped his and remarked: "Zack, you're a fine toddy mixer."

"Yas suh, boss, I 'spec's I's about de bes'. Dat's de way cunnel allers takes his'n."

"Colonel Spottiswoode is a mighty fine man," Gerard observed negligently.

Zack's eyes brightened. "Sho' is, boss; he's a gentleman right."

"He thinks a heap of you." Gerard threw this out as a feeler.

"Lordee, boss, me an' de cunnel is side partners." Zack glanced thirstily at the decanter, Gerard nodded and the negro took another drink. "Cunnel would do anything fer me. 'Ole Reliable'—dat's what he calls me. Fer dat matter, everybody, white an' black, in de whole city o' Vicksburg, calls me Ole Reliable."

"Does the colonel spend much time on the plantation?"

"Yas suh; one week he goes to Sherwood and de nex' week to Kathleen—dat's over on de Mis'sippi River, you know."

"Well, he's going to Kathleen next week to fight the high water. They're afraid of that levee over there." Then all of a sudden Gerard changed his voice, expression and manner with the quick inquiry: "By the way, Uncle Josiah, you came from Uniontown, Alabama?"

Zack's face clouded; he put up his guards again and patched his fences. Perspiration began to gather on his forehead.

"Yas suh; come from de country nigh Uniontown, Sumter County."

"Then you must know old Doctor Potts, if you came from there."

"Yas suh; yas suh."

"And you know Mr. Johnson, who keeps that big hardware store?"

Twenty-one couples of miscellaneous negroes

"Yas suh; I knows him." Zack was sweating blood and glancing toward the door.

"Do you know young Mr. Johnson, his son; he's the sheriff—you're bound to know him."

"Yas suh; sho'ly I knows him."

"And that other son; he must be a lawyer or doctor—or what?"

"I disremembers 'zactly, boss; but I 'spec's he's sumpin' or 'nother, probably—I ain't reel sure."

Jule Gerard leaned back in his chair and looked the old man through and through. Zack felt a cold shiver creeping up his back.

"Boss, I 'spec' I better be goin'—"

"No; shut that door." Zack shut the door.

"Zack!" Gerard used the word as if he meant it.

"Yas suh." And with that he gave up, surrendered.

"Zack, what are you doing in such a scrape as this? You didn't come from Alabama—you came from Vicksburg. Now, you've got to tell me which of these are Vicksburg niggers as I call their names." Gerard began reeling off their names, but Zack didn't answer. He shuffled about, first on one foot and then on the other. "Now, boss, you oughtn't to make me do nuthin' like dat—you knows how niggers is. I ain't got no bizness in sech a humbug as dis—dat's de Gawd's troof."

"How are you going to get out of it?"

"Gawd knows, boss. Ef I could jes' git whar de cunnel is at I'd be all right."

Gerard saw his point and did not badger him; but the sympathy was gone out of his voice as he said with emphasis: "Well, Uncle Josiah, it'll be a long time before you see the colonel. Meet me at the store at two o'clock, with the balance of the hands."

"Yas suh; yas suh." Zack darted out of the door.

Ole Reliable took his place in Gerard's line of conscripts immediately after dinner—twenty-one couples of miscellaneous negroes. Seventeen of these couples had been picked up by Nathan Hooter around Vicksburg. Four couples really came from Alabama. Gerard had a scheme to separate the sheep from the goats. He would put them all to work and watch results. "Men get a dollar a day and women sixty cents," he announced. Each of the men was given a pickax or a shovel and started off, with Watt Crabbe in charge of the gang.

The women went in a separate squad, which included Fighting Jinsy. Two or three were given hoes, and several were given brush-axes. The others carried nothing. Gerard himself went out with the women.

Watt Crabbe led his gang to the edge of Goggle-eye Slough. "Now, boys, we've got to dig a twelve-

foot ditch about three-quarters of a mile long and drain this slough into the creek." The Vicksburg negroes followed his pointing finger and it made them sick. "Dat's more'n two miles," observed Dink under his breath. Dink set to work with a pickax and Ole Reliable threw out the dirt behind him with a shovel. They hadn't been at work twenty minutes before Watt began his process of elimination. Within an hour fourteen men had fallen out. Their hands were soft and blistered from the tools. Crabbe methodically wrote down the names of fourteen fillers.

Out of the seven who stuck to their work, four were from Alabama and two had been laborers on the new streets in Vicksburg, but were temporarily out of a job. Ole Reliable had managed to have himself sent back to the store several times on errands, which saved him from falling out.

Jule Gerard got quick action out of the women; four of them went to work with a will, singing and laughing over their familiar task. They cleared the ditch bank, piled the brush and burnt it. Seventeen of them couldn't work at all.

Jule took the names of the four workers. "All of you go back to the store," said Jule, then rode over to see how Watt was coming on with his gang of men. "Hello, Watt; how many you got left?"

"Seven—look at the rest of them lying around!"

"That's nothing; you ought to have seen the women!" Gerard consulted his list. "Call the husband of Hannah Banks." A man promptly stepped out of the ditch. For each of the four women who knew how to do farm work there was a corresponding man who understood his business. "That cinches it," said Jule. "March 'em back to the store."

Two sullen and grumbling processions—one of men, the other of women—moved across the fields and trudged on to Stillriver store.

Jule Gerard mounted the steps. "Get your wives and line up," he ordered the men. When they stood before him he picked out the four Alabama couples, gave them a dollar each and said: "Now go back to your cabins and put your things in shape. If you need anything, come to me."

Those people stepped out of the line. Seventeen filler couples kept their places. The four wondered what was going to happen to the seventeen. So did the seventeen.

Then Jule Gerard told them: "Here, you Vicksburg niggers, you're in the middle of a bad fix and I'm going to put you through before you get out of it. If a man or woman leaves this plantation without my permission, remember it's six months in jail. You'll dig some ditches, clear some new ground and do a lot of honest work."

The big yellow negro next to Zack gripped his

arm savagely. "You's de nigger what tole dem white folks on us. We done made it up to fix you dis night—dis very night."

But they didn't fix Zack. When they came after him Zack wasn't there to be fixed. He wheedled the white folks out of some rations from the store, which he promptly sold for seventy cents and lit out through the mud for the railroad.

"Dis here foolishness don't suit me; I'm gwine whar de cunnel is at."

CHAPTER XII

HE SAVES THE COUNTRY AND REAPS HIS JUST REWARD

SINCE long before sunrise Ole Reliable had been sitting upon that same log, dozens of miles above Vicksburg, in the very heart of the swamp. That log held out absolutely no seductions as a place to sit down. Cold as the weather was and wet as Zack was, he ought not to have been sitting down at all; but he had walked all night from Stillriver Plantation, twelve miles away, when every step was like pulling his leg out of a gluepot. He just stumbled across that log in the dark and never gathered energy to get up. Zack's feet rested in two inches of water, which did not matter—there wasn't enough water in the seas to make him any soppier. Downward from his waist the blue mud sheathed him in complete armor. Above the waist-line it thinned out gradually to spattered blue freckles on his face. Neither the armor nor the freckles mattered; for his face would wash—it was fast black—and the clothes didn't belong to him. Zack gazed down at himself. "I ain't never gwine to clean dese

clo'es. Soon as I gits whar de cunnel is at, I'll throw 'em away."

It was not exactly raining—rainclouds rolled along the ground like soap-bubbles, saturating everything they touched. Ten miles westward the flooding Mississippi threatened to overwhelm the levees and deluge the land. The swamps around him were rapidly filling with backwater, creeping up to the railroad track.

Light diffused itself slowly from no perceptible source. It was time, by the clock, for light to be turned on. When light did come Zack realized the advantages of his log. It lay in the edge of the woods. He could watch the railroad both ways and also a dismal little flag station, but nobody could see him. If the train came along first he would take it; if anybody else came along he would take the swamp.

With wet and muddy hands he pulled some wet and muddy coins out of a wet and muddy pocket. "Sebenty cents; wonder will dat carry me to Kathleen, whar de cunnel is at?" That was the hardest seventy cents Zack ever remembered getting hold of. He got it by cheating his stomach and selling his rations.

Hungry and worn-out, he sat on his log humming the gambler's song: "Hundred miles from home; forty dollars loser, and nobody gives a damn."

At the first premonition of a south-bound train, Zack rushed to the station and stood in the middle of the track. "I'd ruther git run over dan git left." He didn't get either. He grabbed the first hand-hold that came along and swung himself on to the front end of the white smoking compartment. With his seventy cents in hand he met the conductor. "Mister, I wants to go whar de cunnel is at. Will dis carry me to Bella Station?" He poured nickels and dimes into the conductor's hand.

"Seventy cents; that will carry you to Seminole —eight miles this side of Bella."

"Den I'll jes' set down an' ride as long as it holds out. I wants to go whar de cunnel is at."

A much-bespattered white man sat there smoking. He smiled and handed the conductor a quarter. "Here, Cap, take this old negro where he wants to go."

Zack thanked him listlessly, went to his proper car and slept. The next thing he knew the negro porter shouted: "Bella!"

Zack sprang up.

"Got any baggage?" asked the porter.

"Here 'tis." Zack reached down and grabbed his hat, which had fallen to the floor. Then he stepped off at Bella, into the mist, mud and back-water, without a living thing in sight.

Under normal conditions, Zack would not have

minded a seven-mile walk to Kathleen, "whar de cunnel was at"—where he could get filled up and dried out; but he was so dry inside and so wet outside he hated to travel. Kathleen Plantation fronted the Mississippi River at the end of Buckshot Ridge. Bella Station was on Seminole Ridge. Between the two lay a depression, usually dry, called Seminole Slough. If it hadn't been for Seminole Slough Zack wouldn't have stumbled upon a fortune —but it looked like hard luck at the start.

Zack set out for Kathleen, mashing down the sticky mud and pulling out his feet again. Mud was bad enough, but he came to the slough; and that stopped him. For miles and miles ahead, as far as he could see through the tangle, rising water filled the swamp. He would have waded on, but he couldn't tell how deep it might be and nobody could swim through the underbrush. "I sho' is outdone," he remarked to himself and sat down in the mud—which didn't matter. Then he found a negro who told him that since the back-water rose so high the Kathleen wagons went to Seminole Station instead of coming to Bella. "Now, ef you had jes' got off at Seminole you could 'a' got across dis evenin'; but dere won't be no mo' waggins until day atter to-morrer."

"Ain't dat hard luck?" Zack grumbled. "Ef dat white gent'man hadn't paid my way to Bella I'd 'a' got whar de cunnel is at."

"I tell you what to do," suggested the other negro. "Follow dis slough down to ole man Jim Morgan's an' git a dugout from him. Dat's de onliest way to git through dis swamp in high water."

Zack heartened up wonderfully; he was an expert waterman and could handle a dugout with the best; but all directions look the same in an overflowed swamp, and he got lost. All that day he waded in mud, tore through briers, broke down and climbed over masses of tangled driftwood; but he never did find old man Jim Morgan's. Then he began to notice stumps of cypress, freshly cut; some of the logs were floating and some were anchored so they couldn't get away. "Heap o' timber cut in here," he thought; and Zack knew there must be men with boats.

But Zack recalled unpleasant tales of timbermen who went on anybody's land, cut anybody's timber and then cut anybody's levee to let the water in to float it out—and cut anybody's throat into the bargain. Sometimes the landowners interfered with them—and sometimes landowners disappeared. Zack knew of more than one instance where a levee guard had been shot by men who were trying to cut the levee. Timber-thieves were around—no doubt about it. Zack kept his eyes skinned.

A little before dark he began to reach higher ground and hoped he was getting to the ridge. Then

he saw several dirty tents and a fire. His first impulse was caution; the second impulse gnawed in his stomach. A pot hung over the fire and a man was cooking supper. There were no dogs, and Zack always suspected people who had no dogs. He saw two other men sitting on blocks at either side of a rough table. His wits being sharpened by hunger, he observed them closely; their descriptions afterward became important. One was a short, heavy-set white man, with stubby red beard and sleeves rolled back from a gigantic forearm; the other, a small, wiry man, with a thin black mustache and oily hair. Zack could have shut his eyes and described either one of them, especially Rolf, the Red Axeman, as he was called throughout the swamp.

Rolf sprang to his feet with a half oath and stood upright, pressing his finger steadily on the table. There was a paper or map of some sort spread out before him.

"See here, Bud Shackles, you are going about this thing wrong—the place for that Kathleen levee to break is right here at this black cottonwood tree. It's weak in that turn anyhow. Don't you see that would throw the current right through this slough and float us out to Sunflower River?"

Bud Shackles' expression did not rise to the dignity of a wolf, unless it be a coyote. He had a furtive, animal-like way of searching through the

woods as though somebody were spying upon him. He leaned forward with both elbows on the table and looked up at the big red man. "Let her break most anywhere; that's good enough for me. Rolf, that levee is bound to break or we go broke. I won't stay in here another dry year and watch this timber. If those people hold the levees this year they'll build 'em up so high before the next water that we will never have an overflow and get out. Rolf," he said, "that—levee—is—going—to—break; it is going to break next week; and—it is going to break at the best place for us." Bud was a bolder man than he appeared; he looked the Red Axeman squarely in the eye. Rolf did not flinch or shake his head. He heard, and thought, and nodded. The two were vastly different men, linked together by one fixed idea—to get money. Either would have murdered the other for his share. They had money—a large sum—in these cypress logs. A current of water through that slough, taken at its flood, would sweep them on to fortune.

Zack crouched in the woods and did not hear all that they were saying. The words "Kathleen," "black tree," "levee," constantly recurred. Being a shinglemaker—familiar with the getting out of cypress—Zack understood pretty clearly what Bud Shackles meant.

If Zack had had sufficient belly-timber to carry

him to Kathleen he would have passed up that camp. But he was about to cave in on himself—and the third man kept stirring that pot. He was bound to go to it. So Zack sneaked off a little way, made a noise and came stumbling awkwardly through the underbrush.

"Here, you nigger! What do you want?" Rolf demanded.

"I wants a job, mister, so I kin git sumpin' to eat." Zack needed something to eat—anybody could see that.

"Got no job here. Hit the grit! Vamoose! Skeedaddle!" Rolf spoke gruffly. Then Shackles suggested in a low voice, "We'd better get everything in shipshape."

"Here!" Rolf called. "Come back, old man. Can you use an auger?"

"Sho' kin, boss; I'm a ole shinglemaker." Zack got his supper—with a sentence to hard labor.

Just before dark his experienced ear caught the sound of a paddle; it was a dugout and Zack knew that the paddler was a green hand. As the man came slowly into sight Ole Reliable listened to his erratic strokes and toilsome progress.

Rolf and Bud were evidently waiting for this negro; they met him in the mud at the edge of the slough. As he stepped out of the dugout he handed Bud Shackles a roll of newspapers, which was

opened eagerly. Bud Shackles was interested in the river column, which told of booming waters up above and the inexorable rise of the Mississippi.

"Well, Oliver," Rolf asked the negro abruptly, "how is that levee?"

"Mighty shaky at dat black tree. De big boss is comin' to-morrer."

"Who do you mean—old Spottiswoode?"

"Yas suh; dat's him; de one what owns de plantation."

Zack pricked up his ears and listened diligently, keenly and in part successfully.

The colonel was expected at Kathleen—just as Mr. Gerard had told him. The planters were panicky about their levee; the levee was particularly weak at the black tree turn—near the end of a slough that led into Seminole Slough. Oliver was working on that levee and reporting every night to the timberman; he would come back the next night —all of this the old negro heard and understood.

Ole Reliable watched Oliver—never let the negro get out of his sight. After Oliver had told Rolf and Bud all he knew, got some supper and a drink, he shoved his dugout off from the bank. Ole Reliable noted his course with the eye of a natural boatman. "Huh," he thought— "easy enough to foller dat nigger; he makes mo' fuss dan a town hoss in a brier patch."

Zack spent the next day at hard labor working next to Rolf and in dread of that hairy forearm. Bud and Rolf talked of the river news that was in the papers—the river would continue to rise for three days, when the crest of the flood was expected to pass.

During this day Zack found time to select the best dugout from among those that were beached beneath the bending cypress and put a strong paddle where he could find it. Then he waited for Oliver to come—Oliver who would lead him to "whar the cunnel was at."

The next night, after bringing his report to Rolf and Bud, Oliver departed noisily. Immediately behind him a silent shadow slipped away from the bending cypress and kept the awkward paddler in hearing if not in sight.

The Mississippi levees are nothing but ridges of dirt sodded with Bermuda grass. For quite a while they will resist any strain of water that does not actually wash over them; but after all they are only dirt at heart. If the water stands against them for a long period they get soggy, their weak spots are discovered and they tremble if a man walks upon them. Seepage water trickles through, from nowhere in particular, and as clear as though it had been filtered. This gathers around the base of the levee on the land side, forming a succession of

ponds. So long as this seepage water runs clear it is not considered imminently dangerous; but when mud begins to flow, then the watcher understands that the levee is crumbling inside and may collapse.

If a stream of water an inch thick be once started through a perfectly sound levee, with that tremendous pressure behind it, possibly in ten minutes it will pass beyond the power of mortal man to save —just as Niagara would wreck a breastwork of soft brown sugar. A stick of dynamite will do this in five seconds. A single spade will open it in five minutes; an iron bar—even an ordinary fishing pole—may be thrust through the soft earth, pulled out again, and the gushing water tears it wide open. Bud and Rolf knew how easy it was to destroy a levee; and that water-soaked ridge was all that stood between them and fortune. They also knew that such destruction would devastate miles of rich country, drive people from their homes, wash their fields into gullies and drown their cattle. That was not a timber-thief's lookout; that was for the planter, and the planters looked out. They set guards on the levees night and day. Any man who by day, or especially by night, approached that levee in a skiff was first given the warning sign; then he was notified to stop—and he had better stop. If he persisted in coming on he would be shot. This was the law of the levee. It was not written in the statute-

books, but the peril of the people made it and the necessities of the people enforced it.

The house on Kathleen Plantation fronted the levee, not more than fifty yards away—a long, low, white house, built on high piers, with latticework beneath. It was a comfortable home and was now turned into headquarters for the planters of that entire neighborhood, who were struggling to hold their threatened levee. Billy Wade had come over from Sherwood Plantation—as had many owners and managers from the back country.

That was how Mrs. Bella Wynston—spelled with a *y*—happened to be in temporary command of domestic arrangements on Kathleen. Mrs. Wynston was the first white person to catch sight of Ole Reliable on the morning after he arrived from the timber-thieves' camp. He was sitting on a bench in the back yard, with both hands in his pockets and his legs crossed underneath. She glanced his way and passed on, supposing him to be one of the many stray negroes who had come to work on the levee. While Zack preferred to see Mr. Billy first, he couldn't afford to let any train get by him. He got up and flagged Mrs. Wynston with his battered hat: "Mornin', ma'am."

The lady calmly finished buttoning her glove. She was dressed in her neatest riding suit and carried a whip. During the fight for the levees dozens

of attractive planters would congregate at Kathleen and she must look her best. She did, but Zack didn't.

"Good morning," she answered, as if that were quite sufficient. Something familiar in his attitude struck her and she stopped. "Aren't you the old man that comes up from Vicksburg with the colonel?"

"Yas'm; I are him."

"What is your name?"

"Zack Foster, ma'am; but everybody, white an' black, calls me Ole Reliable." Zack used the name proudly and promptly. On Stillriver Plantation he had been sailing under the title of "Uncle Josiah Walker," which wasn't near as impressive a mouthful.

"And the colonel will be here to-day?" Mrs. Wynston arched her brows very, very slightly.

"Yas'm; he 'lowed to come to-day." Zack didn't volunteer the source of his information—through Oliver—but let her infer that he knew from the colonel himself. Mrs. Wynston moved on in majesty; Zack might have saved himself the trouble of flagging that train. It was a palace-car special and there was no call for breakfast.

Then Zack heard steps coming through the hall. Mrs. Wynston turned and said: "William, I will not have you tracking that mud all over my floors."

Billy answered, but not sharply: "When that levee breaks it'll take this house and you won't have any floors."

Billy strode into the back yard, also in riding costume and muddy from head to foot. His leggings might originally have been of any color—now they were buckshot blue.

"Hello, Uncle Zack!" he called cheerily. "You look like the dogs had had you."

"Yas suh, Mister Billy; sho' is."

"Working on the levee?"

"Been in de water like de res' of 'em," replied Zack diplomatically.

"Come in here and get a drink—you need it." And the sun began to shine for Zack.

Zack started to follow him into the house, but Mrs. Wynston appeared in the door. "William, I draw the line at that!"—nodding toward Zack. So Billy brought him out a glass of whisky and some dry clothes; then he shouted a few joyful words to the kitchen: "Get your breakfast quick and come to the levee; we are afraid she's going to bust."

Dry clothes made Zack feel good, a drink made him feel better, breakfast made him feel the best; but when Colonel Spottiswoode came riding up to the front gallery Zack's bucket of joy slopped over. Ole Reliable darted out of the kitchen and ran around the corner of the house to witness the stately

welcome that Mrs. Bella Wynston—spelled with a *y*—extended to the owner of Kathleen. Zack couldn't understand what she said, but he knew she was talking a lot of language. The colonel seemed preoccupied; he looked anxiously over Mrs. Wynston's shoulder and saw Billy running down the side of the levee. Without replying to Mrs. Wynston's gay little repartee, he stepped to the edge of the gallery and shouted:

"Oh, Billy, did those sacks come?"

"Came last night, Colonel."

"Ten thousand?"

"All here."

"Good. Get 'em out."

Zack manœuvered around from one position to another until the colonel caught sight of him. "Here, Zack; take my horse and give him a good feed."

"Done done it, Cunnel."

This wiped out all previous differences; no awkward questions would be asked—the record was sponged clean.

Colonel Spottiswoode hadn't been in the house ten minutes before he was out again, with his mud-boots, striding ahead of Billy toward the levee. Some distance away, on the crest of the levee, Doctor Paulding, Newton Fisher, Worthington Foote, Hazelwood Kerr—quite a group of planters—were

coming toward them. All of their property would be overflowed if the levee gave way at this point.

Colonel Spottiswoode was sixty years young, clear-eyed, broad-shouldered, with a body of seasoned oak. He had been fighting high water all his life and had seen the levee system grow up from nothing. During the last few years his crop had been raised in security, but now the highest water in a decade threatened to engulf it. He walked up the steep embankment, stopping now and then to stamp on it.

"Billy, it feels mighty shaky."

"Yes, sir; but the worst place is up yonder at the black tree. That's just like mush."

The group of planters hurried toward him.

"Colonel, we are mighty glad to see you. If anybody can hold this levee you are the man."

They shook hands all around without much talking. Colonel Spottiswoode looked out over the expanse of turbulent water, so vast and powerful as compared with their slender thread of dirt that he shrugged his shoulders and remarked: "Gentlemen, I'm afraid we can't fence in a bull with potato ridges. Billy, how much has she risen since morning?"

Billy knelt down to examine a stake on which he kept his marks. "Inch and a half since six o'clock."

Spottiswoode shook his head. "There is just one of two things to do: give up right now or fight."

The planters gathered anxiously around him. "We'll do anything you say."

"Do you want me to take charge of this levee?"

Hazelwood Kerr answered for them all: "Yes, sir; that's why we telegraphed for you."

"You know when I take charge *I take charge!* No back talk!"

They tried to smile, but the situation was too desperate.

"Very well; for a weak levee you need dirt, sacks, men, system. This one must be raised two feet to hold the water that's already in sight. Get on your horses; bring every negro you've got—right away. Send word to the back-country men to come here at once—owners, managers, hands, everybody. Doctor Paulding, you see to that. Newt Fisher will get up your negroes and his own. Bring the women and children; they can fill sacks and sew them up. Don't forget your shotguns," he added significantly.

Within ten minutes after Spottiswoode reached the threatened levee a dozen white men went galloping in different directions. The machinery was beginning to move.

"Now, Billy," said the colonel, "get up your negroes. We'll open the sacks, distribute them and have everything ready."

Billy Wade left Colonel Spottiswoode standing alone on the narrow levee, the sole living thing on that tiny strip of dry land between the river on one side and the back-water on the other. For a moment he turned his back to the river and gazed across those level fields that he loved so dearly, stretching away to the moss-hung woods, the haunt of bear and deer and panther. Smoke curled upward from a hundred cabins; the smell of fresh-plowed earth came to him. Hundreds of people lived there—black people, ignorant people, stolid and singing in the face of danger. A broken levee meant much more than their destruction. Thousands of people whom he could not see, whom he did not know, living in the lower lands, would be swept away, their cattle drowned, their homes destroyed. He shook his head. Not a chance in a thousand to save them; but fighting men would always take the single fighting chance.

From the weather reports he knew there was a foot and a half more of water coming down the river on a huge billow and that the crest would pass that point about the third or fourth day. He wheeled about and looked again at the flood, the raging, ravenous monster. The man faced the river; a lone figure in a brown flannel shirt, corduroy breeches and mud-boots. A wide felt hat shaded his eyes. The senseless, insatiable monster angered him. Then

he tightened his belt and rolled up his sleeves. That meant fight—between men and a monster.

By the time the first volunteers began to arrive, Spottiswoode had inspected that levee for two miles, much of the time down on his hands and knees, trying to shake it, finding the soft places, determining whether the seepage water was bringing dirt and causing a cave inside. Then men came—plenty of them, black and white.

As each planter came galloping back Spottiswoode whispered: "Now, get to work beside your negroes."

Worthington Foote hitched his horse to a fence, took up a shovel and joined a group of his tenants who were digging up dirt for the sacks. Captain Anderson held the sacks for his crew to fill. Mrs. Anderson came and helped the women sew up the sacks. Newton Fisher owned ten thousand acres—he was hefty; being handsome, he was also dressy. At college he made a record; now he made another record, standing in line with his negroes, taking a sack on his shoulder and climbing the levee with it. The negroes grinned; likewise the negroes worked. Doctor Paulding stood at the base of the levee, up to his waist in water, placing each sack in position as it was brought to him.

The negroes worked in shifts of eight hours each. White men worked without cessation. As Colonel

Spottiswoode said: "The river rises every minute in the twenty-four hours; we've got to work every minute to keep ahead of it."

Behind every weak spot sacks full of dirt were piled, beginning at the bottom and building up a base of sufficient width to support the pressure that must come against the crest. Loose dirt would wash away; everything was sacked.

At convenient points along the base of the levee negro women built fires and kept hot the huge kettles of coffee. Gentlemen took their meals on the ground, munching sandwiches from their muddy hands.

The levee grew. "Six inches more and we'll be higher than those fellows over yonder." Spottiswoode nodded toward the other side of the river.

"Then we'll have to double our guards," said Doctor Paulding; everybody knew why.

If the levees on both sides were not high enough to carry off the flood it became a question of which side gave way first. If the line broke on the west that relieved the pressure on the east. The men on the other side were busy, too, trying to keep their own heads above water. If something had to break, each side hoped it would be their neighbors' across the way. A wolfish proposition, but it was the first law of nature.

Ole Reliable stuck close to the colonel, acted as

aide-de-camp and dodged the rougher service. He ran errands, darted here and there.

Zack had forgotten about Oliver—the negro who toted news from the levee to Rolf and Bud Shackles —until he stumbled upon him working with the gang at the black tree. Oliver was busy with the others sacking up that dangerous slide.

Of course Zack didn't inform the white folks—that would be telling; but he undertook to keep an eye on the negro. When the shift was changed Oliver sat for a while on the top rail of the fence, as if he were resting and watching the new shift. Then he dropped on the other side and vanished in the dense cane that lined the slough. Ole Reliable saw him paddling away stealthily in a dugout, but he said nothing.

This little offshoot from the main slough could be very conveniently used; it approached close to the black tree at one end and connected with a labyrinth of lakes at the other. A dugout could bring the levee-cutters within a hundred yards of the levee and secure them a safe retreat.

During the third afternoon Colonel Spottiswoode took a couple of hours' rest. When he reappeared on top of the levee, looking fresh as paint, he remarked: "Well, gentlemen, the crest of the flood is passing. The river will begin to fall this afternoon. Yet we are six inches above water. Now we must

keep her from sloughing off at the bottom and caving in all at once."

In times of danger such as these the air would be full of rumors. If the levee broke in Mississippi, Arkansas would be safe. If the Arkansas levee gave way it would be the salvation of Mississippi. There were desperate and irresponsible men living on both sides.

That night about twenty-five weary but hopeful men gathered in Colonel Spottiswoode's library to talk over the situation. From up and down the line they got the same cheering news—everywhere the same fight was being made, everywhere the levees were standing. There were tales of sudden alarms, desperate work and the ultimate triumph of exhausted men.

"Now, gentlemen," cautioned the colonel, "we mustn't let up; we've got to guard these levees. I don't believe that timbermen or people on the other side would attempt to cut them—"

"Well, I do," bluntly observed Doctor Paulding. "We've got to watch for 'em and we can't shoot too quick." Which seemed to be the consensus of opinion.

Each night men with shotguns patrolled the levees and every man was white. Every yard was too important to risk a negro.

Then something happened. Hazelwood Kerr hap-

pened to be posted at the black tree turn—a dependable young man. He had only two hundred yards to watch, and carried a lantern besides his shotgun. An overturned wagon-body lay about the middle of his beat, at the base of that pyramid of sacks rising, tier by tier, to the very top. This had been built up with great care, as a slough had once run through there and the ground was very soft.

Hazelwood had selected that wagon-body for his headquarters and was sitting upon it facing the tall, burnt cottonwood. It must have been nearly midnight when two men rode up and Hazelwood challenged them. They were Billy Wade and Ole Reliable.

"Hello, Hazelwood! Everything safe?"

"Sure; quiet as a church. The water has fallen half an inch since I came on duty."

"Good! Your wife wants you at the telephone. Uncle Zack will stand your watch until you get back." Hazelwood looked at him keenly and Billy added: "Colonel Spottiswoode says that's all right —the white men are tired out."

"Yas suh, boss; I sho' will stand guard all right. Everybody, white an' black, calls me Ole Reliable." Zack got down proudly off his mule and Hazelwood rode back with Billy. Ole Reliable picked up the shotgun and climbed to the top of the levee. Being the only negro within a hundred miles that carried

a gun, he began patrolling diligently. He looked everywhere, peered up and down the side, squinted along the levee and listened across the water. But this was poor fun, because he had nobody to look at him. He walked to the far end of the beat and talked to young John Sergeant; then he hustled back to the nigh end and conversed with Henry Barnes. Having proved his attendance at both ends, he went to the middle again and sat down on the wagon-body.

A wagon-body is pretty hard. A pile of sacks is nice and soft. That pile of sacks just across the road in a corner of the fence kept butting into Zack's mind.

The fence cornered near the black tree from which Oliver had gone in his dugout; but Ole Reliable didn't think about that—he was sleepy and his head was full of sacks.

Rolf, the Red Axeman, and Bud Shackles, lying in their dugout almost under the black tree, saw Billy Wade come up and change the guard. When Ole Reliable took his seat on the wagon-body he was nearly opposite them. It would be easy to scare him off, but he would yell and draw a hundred men.

Zack squirmed on the wagon-body until it got entirely too hard; he kept thinking about the pile of

sacks. Billy Wade had charged him over and over again not to go out of certain bounds and not to stay in one place more than five minutes. Zack got up and meant to walk toward the levee, but he walked toward the pile of sacks. The trouble wasn't in his head; it was in his legs—they just took him there. He only meant to look at the sacks. They looked good to him. He didn't mean to go to sleep, but he had been up since daylight. That afternoon, while nobody was looking, he had taken several drinks out of somebody's bottle—for medicinal purposes. Zack was not drunk; he was not lazy; he was not even sleepy; he was simply the victim of a pile of sacks.

Nobody knew what happened except Zack—and he didn't know; but he told how it happened and learned to believe it. He wakened suddenly and saw two men running down from the top of the levee straight toward him. They made no noise. Zack felt them coming. He sprang up, paralyzed and too scared to open his mouth. They were running directly toward him and he backed himself against the fence. Then he climbed that fence with the gun in his hand. He must have been throwing his leg over and dragging the gun; anyhow he knocked the hammer against the top rail. Bang! It went off behind him; he heard a scream. Everybody else heard it.

One of the men dropped; the other stopped an instant, then dashed on toward the fence. Zack was already over; the white man tumbled over behind him, running, but Zack kept his lead. He dropped his hat, but clung to the gun. Then it was that he shouted for help and kept shouting. He never did see what became of the man who had chased him over the fence.

From up and down the levee came the shouts of excited men. Somebody flung open the front door of the big house and Zack saw a stream of men come pouring out. He climbed the fence again, ran back toward the levee, crossed the road, climbed the levee, got into the very thickest of the crowd and kept yelling.

The men around him bore him backward to the black tree turn; water rushed over the levee. Nobody noticed Zack; nobody asked a question—everybody ran to the crevasse. Sacks filled with dirt were already there; fifty men put them in position. The flow stopped; the country was saved. Colonel Spottiswoode himself stumbled over the dead man and flashed a lantern in his face. "Hello, what's this? Here's a dead man; here's a spade. Dynamite! Billy, who stood guard here?"

"This is the post where Ole Reliable relieved Hazelwood Kerr."

"Well," announced the colonel, "Zack got him."

"Got who? Got who?" Twenty planters crowded round and others came.

"Zack Foster, Ole Reliable—my nigger—he got him!"

"Where is Zack? Where is Zack?" forty voices demanded. Men may catch hysteria as well as women.

Out of the babel of voices Zack heard the colonel shout: "Go get Zack! Go get Zack!"

A group of maddened men rushed at him. He dropped on his knees, limp, cold, draggled. "Befo' Gawd, gent'men! I never—I—I— For Gawd's sake!"

They jerked him up, bore him with them, slapped him on the back and proclaimed him a hero.

The colonel waited eagerly among the crowd of excited men. "Paulding, ain't Zack a peach? Bless his faithful old heart! I want to shake hands with him."

"We've got him! We've got him! Here he is, Colonel."

Zack made no resistance; he only made excuses. "Mister Billy, I nebber stepped off dat beat—nebber turned my back—"

"That's all right, Zack; you needn't be scared."

"No suh, Mister Billy; I nebber went away from dere one time. I—"

"Nobody's going to prosecute you. You had a perfect right to kill him."

Newton Fisher was impulsive and strong. He smote the old man on the back and jostled him. "Zack, you're a dandy; you've saved the country!" Newt seized his arm and bore him triumphantly to the colonel. Spottiswoode ran forward with outstretched hand, but Zack got there first with his tongue. "Nebber closed my eyes, Cunnel—I watched dat levee every minute."

"You did splendidly, Zack; splendidly. It took nerve."

"Yas suh; yas suh."

Doctor Paulding rose from his examination of the fallen man and did not pretend to be sorry over his announcement: "He's dead—full load struck him in the breast."

"Well," remarked the colonel, "I hate to see anybody get killed, but Rolf was a bad egg."

"Zack, I congratulate you," said the doctor, bowing profoundly as he shook the negro's hand.

"Zack, you made a bully good shot," remarked Worthington Foote, who was a critic of good shots.

"Yas suh—I made one shot," Zack assented.

Ole Reliable stood in a compact group, with men walking round the edges anxious to hear every word he said. He didn't say much. "How did it happen?"

they demanded over and over; then answered the question themselves.

Zack suggested only one idea: "Dey mus' 'a' come up dat slough in a dugout!"—something that had been in his mind since he followed Oliver from the timber-camp.

Three men with lanterns sprang over the fence and shouted back that they had found footprints. Everybody else went tumbling over. Colonel Spottiswoode called peremptorily: "Come back, all of you! Post a guard over those footprints until morning."

Doctor Paulding was in a bloody-minded mood; he regretted that the man got away. "I wish somebody had been out there when you hollered for help."

This opened up the conversation for Johnny Sergeant. "I was on the next beat, but I couldn't get to him quick enough."

Zack said: "Yas, dat man clumb de fence."

"I heard you out there calling for help. I wish I could have got there to help you catch him."

"Yas suh; I sho' hollered fer help."

"And it's a blessed thing you hollered so quick," remarked the colonel. "In another five minutes that levee would have been gone."

"Yas suh, Cunnel; I hollered right brief."

"And you certainly made a good shot." An idea which seemed to be on Doctor Paulding's mind.

"Thankee, suh; thankee, Doctor."

The colonel took Zack by the arm. "Now everybody let him alone."

Arm in arm the planter and the negro walked back to the house; and every white man who could get into the room crowded Colonel Spottiswoode's library. Negroes stood on the gallery, climbed up and hung in at the windows. "Now, Zack," said the Colonel, looking up from his table, "we will have to make some statement about this matter. Tell me exactly how it happened while it is fresh in your mind."

Zack, bareheaded and excited, fumbled at his words: " 'Twar'nt nuthin, Cunnel, an' not much o' dat; it was so dark I couldn't hardly see. Dem two men come slippin' up dat slough in a dugout an' clumb de fence an' got up on de levee whilst I had my back turned a minit. Dey wouldn't quit, so I jes' up wid dat gun. Dat wuz all—'cept I admits to makin' a few hollers."

"Gentlemen," remarked the colonel, looking at the eager faces around him, "that is a hero's statement, simple and modest. Wait a moment, please."

He took a sheet of paper and began writing hurriedly. Nobody spoke; they supposed him to be setting down the statement while he could remember every word of it. When he had finished he arose and read: "For and in consideration, et cetera, I

do hereby convey to Zack Foster and Selina Foster, his wife, that certain house nearest to the black tree and twenty acres of land, to be selected by himself, which shall be their home so long as they, or either of them, shall live. Signed, Beverly Spottiswoode."

The colonel stepped in front of Zack as gracefully as if he were presenting a diploma to the sweet girl graduate and handed him the deed. "Zack, this is not a gift. It is your due. Your heroism has saved your country." Then everybody cheered and shouted until the roof rang; outside the negroes took up the cry and the conquered river shivered as it heard.

Newt Fisher was impulsive. He snatched a handsome watch out of his pocket. "Here, Zack, is a token of my friendship. I'll have it appropriately engraved."

Zack stood mute, holding the paper in one hand and the watch in the other. Gentlemen began feeling in their pockets, but money was not the correct thing. Doctor Paulding solved the difficulty. He took a scrap of paper and wrote: "Due Zack Foster, the hero of the black tree crevasse, one mule, to be selected by himself."

Everybody crowded to the table and began scribbling. "Zack," laughed the colonel, "put your hat on the table."

"I—I los' it, Cunnel." Zack had lost his hat when he ran away.

"Here's mine," said the colonel.

Zack put Colonel Spottiswoode's hat on the table and those grateful planters filled it with mules, cows, buggies, sets of furniture, checks. Zack loved to hear those nice gentlemen cheer and make speeches, but he couldn't understand why they kept throwing scraps of paper into the colonel's hat.

The waters had gone and the spring had come. It was Sunday morning. Ole Reliable sat upon his own gallery in one rocking-chair, with his feet in another. A plush sofa—violently red—stood against the wall and Selina reposed. Zack was smoking. Selina was smiling.

"Zack," she grumbled, "I wants one o' dese m'lodeons what plays music. 'Pears like to me you oughter got one o' dem."

Ole Reliable erupted a huge cloud of smoke. "Now, Seliny, you knows 'zackly how 'tis wid white folks. Don't make no diffunce what we does fer 'em, dey don't nebber pay us nuthin'. Dey mout 'a' throwed in a nigger to work some o' dis lan' fer me!"

THE END

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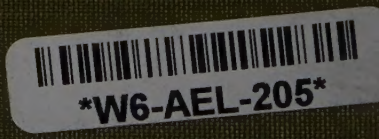
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